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“The Chinese threat?” Austrian-Chinese and their sense of Belonging During a
Global Pandemic

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Abstract

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht, wie Österreich-Chinesen der zweiten Generation Zugehörigkeit, Identität und kulturelle Verortung im Kontext der COVID-19-Pandemie verhandeln. Anhand qualitativer Interviews wird aufgezeigt, wie transnationale Bindungen, Rassismuserfahrungen und mediale Diskurse Identitätsprozesse beeinflussen. Im Zentrum stehen alltägliche Aushandlungen hybrider Zugehörigkeit, familiäre Strategien der kulturellen Weitergabe sowie der Einfluss pandemiebedingter Sinophobie auf Selbst- und Fremdwahrnehmung. Die theoretische Rahmung erfolgt durch Konzepte wie „simultane Verortung“ (Levitt & Glick Schiller), das „Dazwischen-Sein“ (Bhabha) und die „Politiken der Zugehörigkeit“ (Yuval-Davis). Die Arbeit zeigt, dass Identität ein dynamischer, kontextabhängiger Prozess ist, der durch transgenerationale Erinnerung, affektive Bindungen und gesellschaftliche Ausschlüsse geformt wird.

This thesis explores how second-generation Austrian-Chinese individuals negotiate identity, belonging, and cultural positioning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on qualitative narrative interviews, the study reveals how transnational ties, experiences of racism, and media discourses shape identity formation. Central themes include hybrid belonging, intergenerational cultural transmission, and the impact of pandemic-related Sinophobia on self-perception and social recognition. The analysis is grounded in theoretical concepts such as simultaneity (Levitt & Glick Schiller), hybridity (Bhabha), and the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis). The findings highlight that identity is a fluid and context-dependent process shaped by memory, emotion, and structural exclusion.

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1.0. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, not only triggered a global health emergency but also unleashed a parallel crisis of social meaning and belonging. As the virus spread rapidly beyond China's borders, a surge in Sinophobic and xenophobic sentiment swept across diverse societies, transforming Chinese and East Asian bodies into both literal and symbolic carriers of disease (Elias et al., 2021; Gao, 2022). Media coverage and public discourse quickly racialized the pandemic, casting Chinese identities as objects of suspicion and scapegoating in ways that reached far beyond countries with large Asian populations or histories of immigration.

With its relatively small and previously "invisible" Chinese diaspora (Kaminski & Xu, 2017), Austria became a revealing site for these dynamics. The emergence of COVID-19 disrupted established narratives of national identity and multiculturalism, rendering Austrian-Chinese individuals suddenly hyper-visible, subject to both direct and subtle forms of social exclusion, verbal aggression, and public suspicion. This transformation occurred in a national context where discourses of migration, belonging, and cultural homogeneity have long been dominated by debates around Turkish, Balkan, or Eastern European communities (Wodak & Boukala, 2015).

While the pandemic was initially approached as a biological emergency, it quickly became evident that its most enduring effects were profoundly social and political, rather than acting as a "great equalizer." COVID-19 exposed and exacerbated existing inequalities, structural, economic, and racial (Elias et al., 2021). Chinese individuals and broader East Asian communities, both globally and in Austria, became targets of blame and hostility, facing not only verbal harassment and online abuse but also discriminatory practices and, elsewhere, physical violence. These developments suggest that pandemics can act as catalysts, activating latent prejudices and reinforcing the boundaries of national and racial belonging.

This thesis examines how second-generation Austrian-Chinese individuals navigated the intensification of Sinophobia during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on their lived experiences, resilience strategies, and identity negotiations. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews, it investigates how identity, transnational ties, and racialization intersect to shape their sense of belonging within a context marked by Austria's contested narratives of national identity and cultural integration, overlapping histories of exclusion, and shifting global anxieties. By doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on Sinophobia and diaspora identity while providing nuanced, context-specific insights into Austrian society.

Crucially, this thesis situates the Austrian-Chinese experience within local and global frameworks, drawing on scholarship in migration studies, critical race theory, and affect theory to illuminate the symbolic and emotional dimensions of belonging and exclusion. Concepts such as transnational social fields (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004), hybrid and “third space” identities (Bhabha, 1994), and the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006) frame the analysis, highlighting that belonging is not only about legal status or ancestry, but is continually negotiated, especially under conditions of crisis and racialization.

Empirically, this research addresses a notable gap in the literature, as the experiences of the Austrian-Chinese community have rarely been foregrounded in Anglophone scholarship. The rich qualitative data reveal the multiple, sometimes contradictory, ways in which participants experienced integration, exclusion, solidarity, and pride. Their narratives illuminate how global Sinophobic discourses intersect with Austria’s specific history of migration, nationalism, and “racial silence,” complicating the lines between insider and outsider, citizen and stranger (Essed, 1991).

The author deliberately employs the term “Austrian-Chinese” to provide clarity and facilitate the exploration of shared experiences and collective challenges faced by participants who have a common cultural or familial connection to China while being raised within Austrian society. However, the author simultaneously engages in critical reflection on this categorization from a cultural and social anthropological perspective. Such reflection is crucial because terms that categorize identity inherently shape perceptions, social interactions, and policy implications. In anthropology, understanding the implications of categorization helps reveal power dynamics, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and the complex interplay between individual agency and collective identities. “Austrian-Chinese” implies not merely a dual cultural affiliation but rather encompasses diverse individual narratives, social practices, and cultural meanings. The term acts as a convenient category but risks homogenizing experiences and erasing nuanced differences, particularly salient for individuals of mixed heritage who actively negotiate and integrate multiple cultural frameworks simultaneously. Critical examination of this term ensures a deeper recognition of identity, fluidity, and the lived realities of cultural hybridity. By explicitly acknowledging the complexity of such categorizations, this thesis contributes to a richer and more nuanced understanding of identity within the Austrian socio-cultural landscape.

1.1. Topic, Aims, and Research Question

This thesis explores how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the 'sense of belonging' among Austrian-Chinese individuals. Situated within the framework of social and cultural anthropology, the study explores how the Austrian-Chinese community's unique perspective sheds light on the experiences of diasporic community members during a time marked by global fear, nationalism, and racialized narratives.

Belonging is not a fixed or inherent state; it is socially constructed, fluid, and deeply affected by external sociopolitical conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic represents a critical moment in which many minority communities were forced to re-evaluate their place in society. For individuals of Chinese descent in Austria, the pandemic presented unique challenges to their identity and sense of belonging, as Sinophobic attitudes and discourses intensified across public and political spheres (Elias et al., 2021).

The central aim of this study is, therefore, to understand how second-generation Austrian-Chinese individuals perceived their sense of belonging during and after the pandemic, and whether this perception shifted in response to increasing Sinophobia and racialization. This investigation draws on qualitative data to explore these subjective experiences in depth.

The primary research question guiding this study is:

How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the perceived sense of belonging among second-generation Austrian-Chinese individuals?

From a socio-cultural anthropological perspective, this question connects with long-standing debates about identity, hybridity, and the politics of belonging. The pandemic, as a 'moment of rupture,' forced diasporic communities to re-evaluate their place within the nation-state, making previously latent dynamics of exclusion visible and urgent. By attending to the narratives of second-generation Austrian-Chinese, this thesis expands our understanding of Sinophobia globally, offering broader insights into the challenges and possibilities of living 'between worlds' in times of crisis.

Given the exploratory and experiential nature of this inquiry, a qualitative research design is the most appropriate methodological approach. As Stake (2010) notes, qualitative research is well-suited for understanding phenomena through the lens of personal experience, context, and meaning-making. This study employs narrative interviews as the primary data collection method, enabling participants to articulate their lived realities, personal reflections, and emotional responses in their own words. The open and dialogical format of narrative interviews allows for rich, in-depth insights into how individuals conceptualize and negotiate belonging to their Chinese heritage and Austrian social environment.

Furthermore, by centering on the experiences of second-generation Austrian-Chinese individuals, the study offers insight into how belonging is shaped by growing up between cultures. This focus allows for an exploration of how cultural embeddedness, bilingual upbringing, and inherited family histories influence responses to exclusion, resilience, and identity negotiation, particularly during moments of societal crisis.

The following working hypothesis informs the analytical framework of this thesis:

Rising Sinophobic tendencies in Austria, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have significantly altered the perceived sense of belonging among Austrian-Chinese individuals, particularly second-generation migrants.

This hypothesis is grounded in existing scholarship that highlights the role of racialization and “othering” in shaping the experiences of migrant and diasporic communities during times of national or global crisis (Gover et al., 2020; Elias et al., 2021). By situating this case study within the broader literature on identity, migration, and crisis, this research seeks to contribute to an emerging field of inquiry that examines how belonging is assessed, reshaped, and reasserted under pressure.

1.2. Relevance, Contribution, and Limitations of the Study

1.2.1. Relevance, Contribution

This study contributes to contemporary anthropological research by exploring the complex interplay between identity, race, and belonging during a global crisis. By focusing on the Austrian-Chinese community, a group often overlooked in mainstream migration and diaspora studies, this research addresses a significant empirical and theoretical gap. The relevance of this research lies in its capacity to illuminate how structural racism, public discourse, and emotional responses interact in shaping diasporic subjectivities in times of uncertainty.

This thesis engages with and contributes to several theoretical domains within social and cultural anthropology. First, it builds on migration and diaspora studies by analyzing how smaller, underrepresented diasporic groups, such as the Austrian-Chinese, navigate identity and belonging during crises. By situating participants’ experiences within the broader frameworks of nationalism (Anderson, 1983), transnationalism (Appadurai, 1996; Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc, 1995), and hybridity, the study advances discussions around how globalization and local exclusionary discourses intersect in everyday life.

The study also engages with critical race theory, particularly through Bonilla-Silva’s (1997) concept of structural racism, to analyze how pandemic-related narratives reproduce systemic forms of exclusion. Furthermore, the integration of affect theory (Ahmed, 2004) and the

anthropology of emotions allows for a nuanced exploration of how feelings such as fear, anxiety, pride, and resilience influence identity construction and belonging. As Ahmed (2004) emphasizes, emotions are not merely personal but are socially and politically mediated; this research demonstrates how they become central to diasporic meaning-making during times of disruption.

Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive analytical lens for examining how diasporic identities are not static but are dynamically reshaped through social and political crises.

Methodologically, the study employs a narrative inquiry approach, emphasizing the voices and subjectivities of participants. This method enables the capture of complex, emotionally charged narratives that quantitative methods may obscure. In line with Stake (2010), qualitative narrative interviews are appropriate for exploring lived experiences and personal perceptions in specific contexts.

While primarily qualitative, the study also draws selectively on demographic and migration-related statistics to contextualize its findings within broader sociohistorical patterns. This combination allows for a multidimensional understanding of identity, positioning the study as a methodological contribution to the anthropology of migration by demonstrating how qualitative narrative inquiry can be enriched through the contextual use of secondary demographic and media data. While not a formal mixed-methods design, the study draws selectively on quantitative sources to frame and support qualitative insights.

The study offers practical implications for policymakers, educators, and media professionals, highlighting the urgent need for anti-racist policy frameworks, particularly during global crises. It advocates for more inclusive and accurate media representations of minority communities. By exposing the structural and interpersonal dimensions of exclusion, the findings support the development of multicultural education programs that address racial bias and foster cross-cultural understanding in Austria.

For community organizations, the study provides insight into the emotional and psychological dimensions of marginalization, pointing to the importance of culturally sensitive mental health and social support services for racialized communities.

In anthropological terms, this research highlights the importance of examining smaller diasporic communities, which are often overlooked in dominant migration discourses. The Austrian-Chinese community is a compelling case study through which broader questions of belonging, nationalism, and globalization can be explored. It contributes to a nuanced understanding of integration, exclusion, and resilience in the Austrian sociopolitical context.

This research further enriches the literature on Chinese transnational migration, offering new perspectives on how global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, disrupt, reshape, and redefine everyday life for diasporic individuals. As Kwok (2013) notes, research on the Chinese in Austria has been limited and published in German. By publishing this thesis in English, the goal is to make this data accessible to a broader academic audience and to contribute to a more international and inclusive scholarly discourse.

1.2.2. Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size is small, a characteristic of narrative and qualitative research. The findings are not intended to be generalized to all Austrian-Chinese individuals or other diasporic communities. Instead, the goal is to provide rich, situated insights into how second-generation Austrian-Chinese individuals experienced shifts in their sense of belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, the study focuses solely on second-generation participants, individuals born or raised in Austria to parents of Chinese origin. This generational specificity allows for a focused examination of how young, often bicultural individuals negotiate identity in a national context where racialized minorities are frequently symbolically excluded. However, it also means the study does not profoundly engage with first-generation migration experiences or intergenerational dynamics. Future research would benefit from including a broader range of generational perspectives to examine how belonging evolves across time, age, and migratory status.

Third, the study's national scope presents contextual boundaries. Austria has a unique migration history, a relatively small Chinese diaspora, and a sociopolitical environment shaped by its narratives of nationalism and integration. Therefore, these findings may not be transferable to countries with different demographic compositions or cultural attitudes toward migration and race. Comparative studies across European or global contexts would help evaluate whether the patterns identified here are context-specific or more broadly applicable.

A further limitation involves the interpretive scope of the thematic analysis. While the study engages with intersecting factors, such as racism, media representation, affective nationalism, and transnational identity, it does not assess the relative influence or weight of each factor. Instead, it focuses on participants' subjective narratives and lived experiences, consistent with narrative inquiry methodology. Future research might consider isolating specific variables (e.g., perceived discrimination, ethnic community affiliation, language proficiency) to test their influence on belonging more systematically.

Lastly, it must be emphasized that the experiences of second-generation Austrian-Chinese individuals are not homogenous. While some participants described direct encounters with Sinophobia and social exclusion, others reported more subtle or even absent experiences of discrimination. This diversity is reflected in the narratives and underscores multiple intersecting factors, including gender, region, socioeconomic status, and personal history, that shape identity negotiation. The study does not aim to speak for the entire community but to highlight a spectrum of individual responses to a collective moment of global uncertainty.

1.3. Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into five chapters, each building upon the previous to provide a comprehensive analysis of how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the sense of belonging among Austrian-Chinese individuals.

Chapter One introduces the topic, outlines the research aims, and poses the central research question. It situates the study within the broader academic discourse on migration, diaspora, racialization, and identity, while identifying a specific gap in the literature regarding the lived experiences of Chinese communities in Austria during times of global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter Two outlines the methodological framework and research design, justifying the use of a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, describing the sampling strategy, and detailing the procedures for conducting and transcribing the interviews. Additionally, the chapter discusses the coding and data analysis techniques employed, as well as the ethical considerations and reflexive practices undertaken to ensure the study's rigor and integrity.

Chapter Three lays the theoretical foundation for the study, beginning with a historical and statistical overview of Chinese migration to Austria. It explores key concepts from migration studies, including transnationalism and hybrid identity. The chapter engages with scholarship on belonging, affect, and racialization, drawing on theorists such as Birgitt Röttger-Rössler (2014; 2018) and Nira Yuval-Davis (2006; 2007). It concludes with an in-depth examination of global and local Sinophobia, particularly as it intensified during the pandemic.

Chapter Four presents the study's empirical findings, which are based solely on the experiences of second-generation Austrian-Chinese individuals. This chapter is organized thematically, exploring topics such as transnational belonging, identity negotiation, the impact of pandemic-related racism, media representations, and resilience strategies.

Chapter Five concludes the thesis by summarizing the key findings and reflecting on their theoretical and practical implications. It discusses the study's contribution to anthropological

understandings of migration and belonging, highlights its limitations, and offers suggestions for future research. Additionally, the chapter stresses the importance of centering underrepresented voices in diaspora and crisis studies.

2.0. Methodology

2.1. Qualitative Research

Qualitative research plays a significant role in anthropological inquiry, offering tools to understand the complexities of human experience in specific social and cultural contexts. In anthropology, qualitative methodologies such as ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, and narrative inquiry are widely used to explore how individuals interpret and give meaning to their worlds (Clandinin, 2005). Each approach emphasizes subjective experience and the social construction of meaning, although they do so through different analytical lenses.

Narrative inquiry uncovers meaning-making and traces how individuals position themselves socially and emotionally in their stories (Riessman, 2008).

For this thesis, narrative inquiry was chosen as the primary methodological approach. Narrative inquiry focuses on the stories individuals tell about their lives and the meaning they attribute to those experiences. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note, narrative inquiry seeks to understand how people experience the world by listening to, analyzing, and representing their stories. These narratives are embedded within broader social, cultural, and institutional frameworks, making the method particularly well-suited to exploring identity formation and belonging in diasporic and marginalized communities.

This research applies narrative inquiry to examine the lived experiences of Austrian-Chinese individuals during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The central goal is to explore how participants made sense of their identities and social realities in a context shaped by rising Sinophobia, racialization, and exclusion. The methodology enables in-depth engagement with the personal and emotional dimensions of belonging, offering insight into how individuals narrate their sense of self and community amidst crises.

Narrative inquiry involves collecting and analyzing various data sources, including interview transcripts, conversations, documents, photographs, and artifacts (Clandinin, 2005). In this study, data were primarily gathered through semi-structured narrative interviews, which allowed participants to recount their experiences in their own words while allowing the researcher to guide the conversation around key themes related to identity, migration, exclusion, and belonging. This approach not only captures individual voices but also situates them within the broader socio-political climate of Austria during the pandemic.

The analysis followed inductive coding procedures, identifying themes and patterns that emerged organically from the data rather than applying a rigid preexisting framework. This

method aligns with interpretive traditions in anthropology, where the goal is to understand meaning-making processes from the participants' perspectives while remaining attentive to power dynamics, historical context, and structural influences.

While narrative inquiry forms the backbone of the research design, it is complemented by ethnographic principles, which emphasize contextualization and immersion in the participants' social worlds. Due to the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, complete ethnographic immersion was not feasible; however, using statistical data helped to reconstruct elements of the social environment in which participants' experiences were embedded.

Narratives, as both data and theory, serve a dual function in social and cultural anthropology, offering empirical insights into lived realities and reflecting how individuals internalize and resist dominant discourses. For Austrian-Chinese individuals during the pandemic, stories of discrimination, adaptation, and resilience become potent expressions of identity negotiation. The narrative inquiry method is thus particularly well-suited for capturing these layered, affective experiences and making visible the often-silenced voices of marginalized communities.

In sum, this qualitative and narrative approach aligns with the thesis's broader aim: to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the sense of belonging among Austrian-Chinese individuals and to explore how their personal stories reflect and challenge broader societal dynamics.

2.2. Interviews

Semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted to explore the lived experiences and emotional landscapes of Austrian-Chinese individuals. This method allowed participants to express their personal histories, perceptions, and experiences in their own words, offering rich and nuanced insights into their sense of belonging. As Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2007) explain, the narrative interview technique is designed to create a conversational setting that stimulates storytelling around significant personal or social events. The term "*narrative*" derives from the Latin "*narrare*," meaning to recount or tell a story, capturing the essence of this approach: enabling participants to construct and communicate meaning through narrative form.

In this study, the narrative interview was both a data collection method and an analytical tool. This approach is especially valuable in anthropological research that seeks to understand how individuals situate their subjective experiences within larger social, cultural, and institutional frameworks. Through storytelling, participants revealed how their identities and experiences as Austrian-Chinese were shaped by everyday life and the extraordinary context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each interview was conducted in a semi-structured manner, guided by a flexible interview protocol. While participants were encouraged to speak freely and steer the conversation in directions they deemed essential, a set of core themes was developed in advance to ensure consistency across interviews. These themes included migration history, experiences of belonging, encounters with racism or Sinophobia, emotional responses to the pandemic, and perceptions of safety and identity before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview structure ensured both comparability across cases and the openness necessary to preserve the uniqueness of each narrative.

The interviews began by establishing a baseline understanding of each participant's feelings regarding their sense of belonging. This was accomplished by asking about their migration background or, in this case, as all interviewees were second-generation individuals, their upbringing and experiences growing up in Austria. The conversation then moved toward their perceptions of racial discrimination and experiences with xenophobia or Sinophobia, both before and during the pandemic. These discussions were essential to understanding how belonging was negotiated and challenged in the context of increased public hostility and social anxiety.

To provide a degree of structure and ensure that key topics were addressed, the following interview guide was developed and used as a reference throughout the research process.

The Guiding Questionnaire for the Master's Thesis is attached as Appendix 7.1.

This interview design was developed to be sensitive and adaptable, acknowledging the emotional weight of topics such as racism and exclusion. Participants were given the option to skip any questions that made them uncomfortable. All interviews were conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for qualitative research, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and providing the right to withdraw at any point.

By centering participants' narratives, this method enabled a deeper understanding of how identity and belonging were experienced and reconfigured in the context of a global health crisis and rising Sinophobia. The collected narratives offer valuable insight into personal trajectories and broader social processes shaping diasporic life in Austria.

2.3. Sampling

This study employed a non-probability sampling strategy, specifically a combination of purposive and exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling, to recruit participants who identify as Austrian-Chinese. The sample aimed to include individuals who could provide rich, personal insights into their experiences of identity and belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Adults (18 years and older) born in Austria with ancestral ties to the People's Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong, Macau, or Taiwan.
- Individuals who self-identified as Chinese while living in Austria.
- Individuals who had resided in Austria for at least 10 years, ensuring sufficient contextual knowledge of the host society.
- Willingness to participate in an in-depth interview about identity, belonging, and experiences related to racialization.
- Residing in Austria during the COVID-19 pandemic, from early 2020 onward.

These criteria were developed to ensure that participants were personally and temporally close to the research topic, enabling meaningful engagement with questions related to Sinophobia, social exclusion, and identity negotiation in the Austrian context.

The initial recruitment followed a purposive sampling approach to identify key participants with relevant backgrounds. Subsequently, the Exponential Non-Discriminative Snowball Sampling method was implemented (Bhat 2024). In this model, an initial participant, often called the "seed", is identified and asked to refer additional individuals from their network. Each subsequent participant then provides further referrals, creating a chain of recruitment that expands until the desired number of participants is reached.

This method was particularly appropriate for the study, given its focus on a small, dispersed, and socially networked community. It is also especially effective for reaching individuals who may be reluctant to speak about sensitive experiences, such as racism or Sinophobia, outside of trusted community networks. To facilitate this process, a community gatekeeper played a crucial role in introducing the researcher to potential participants and vouching for the legitimacy and ethical integrity of the study.

Six participants, three men and three women, ages 21 to 28, were interviewed. All participants (n=6) were second-generation Austrian-Chinese, meaning they were born and raised in Austria.

While the study's sample size is small, comprising six participants, it aligns with the goals of narrative research, which prioritizes depth over breadth. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that this sample represents a minimal segment of Austria's estimated 18,300 Chinese-descent residents (Statistik Austria, 2023). As such, findings should be interpreted as exploratory and illustrative rather than generalizable.

The following table presents a basic demographic overview of the participants. Names have been anonymized to ensure confidentiality, following ethical research guidelines.

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Generation	Date of Interview
Jenny H.	22	F	2nd	6 February 2024
Jessica W.	22	F	2nd	20 February 2024
Eteri G.	21	F	2nd	21 February 2024
Lu Z.	30	M	2nd	2 March 2024
Thomas R.	28	M	2nd	12 June 2024
Lukas G.	24	M	2nd	28 September 2024

This composition strongly represents second-generation perspectives, enabling insight into how individuals who socialized within Austrian society experienced racialization and belonging across different life stages.

The interviews' usual length ranged from 47 to 90 minutes. The "Full Verbatim" method was used to transcribe the interviews to capture how something was said. This ensured that the emotions of the interview participants were fully recorded as well.

Punctuation guidelines by Amberscript (2022) are attached in 7.2. Appendix.

2.4. Coding and analyzing the data

An inductive approach, open coding, was employed to analyze the narrative data collected through interviews. Inductive coding, or open coding, is a bottom-up strategy in which themes and categories emerge directly from the data rather than being pre-imposed by a theoretical framework (Delve Tool, 2024). This approach was particularly well-suited to the exploratory and participant-centered nature of the research, allowing the participants' voices to guide the development of analytical categories.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Particular attention was paid to preserving the nuance and tone of each speaker's voice, including pauses, hesitations, and emotional inflections where relevant. This

level of detail was essential for maintaining the narrative integrity of each account, as the interview data functioned not only as a source of empirical evidence but also as a form of storytelling in itself.

After multiple close readings of the transcripts, an initial coding framework was developed, including major thematic categories and corresponding sub-categories. These were defined based on recurring themes, emotional expressions, and the socio-political context embedded in participants' narratives.

The following code list reflects the range of themes identified across interviews:

- Transnational Ties
- Social Media
- Family Migration History
- Growing up in Austria
- Chinese Communities
- Relationship with Chinese Communities before COVID-19
- Relationship with Chinese Communities during COVID-19
- Relationship with Chinese Communities after COVID-19
- Emotions
- Feeling Disappointed
- Feeling Powerless
- Feeling Scared
- COVID-19
- Sinophobia
- Racism
- Microaggressions
- Verbal Attacks
- Resilience

These themes formed the foundation for interpreting how Austrian-Chinese participants constructed, negotiated, and communicated their sense of identity and belonging. Emotional codes such as disappointment, powerlessness, and fear were central to understanding how the pandemic and the racism it unleashed were experienced on a practical level.

Secondary quantitative data and media analysis complemented and contextualized the interview narratives. This included statistics from government reports (e.g., migration and population trends), academic studies, and public media discourse analysis. For instance, visual representations, such as population trends among Chinese migrants in Austria and the

frequency of Sinophobia-related language in Austrian media outlets, provided macro-level insights into the socio-political environment in which participants' stories unfolded.

This triangulated approach ensured that the findings were rooted in subjective narratives and understood within the broader social, political, and historical context. It also allowed the study to bridge micro-level lived experiences with macro-level systemic dynamics, enhancing the research's overall reliability and interpretive depth.

2.5. Validity and Reliability

Ensuring validity and reliability is crucial in qualitative research, especially when dealing with sensitive topics such as racialized experiences and identity negotiation. This study adopted specific methodological and procedural strategies to enhance the credibility of the findings (internal validity) and their dependability (reliability).

2.5.1. Validity

To support internal validity, the method of narrative inquiry was carefully selected. While useful in quantitative studies, standardized questionnaires would have constrained participants' ability to express the emotional, historical, and contextual depth of their lived experiences. Semi-structured narrative Interviews, in contrast, allowed for an open-ended, flexible structure in which participants could recount their stories in their own terms, enabling the researcher to access the affective dimensions of belonging and culturally embedded meanings.

The decision to use narrative interviews aligns with the anthropological aim of understanding empirical perspectives, the insider's view, which is essential when investigating subjective phenomena like identity, discrimination, and community ties. The interviews were designed to elicit participants' life stories, particularly about migration history, generational identity, and experiences of Sinophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach ensured that the data collected was rich, authentic, and contextually grounded.

Moreover, the use of exponential, non-discriminatory snowball sampling enhanced the study's validity by facilitating access to individuals who might otherwise be difficult to reach. This method was significant for a community in which trust and personal referral play a key role in engagement, especially when discussing emotionally charged experiences like racial discrimination. While not statistically representative in the quantitative sense, the sample was demographically and generationally diverse enough to capture a meaningful cross-section of Austrian-Chinese perspectives.

2.5.2. Reliability

The research design emphasized consistency in applying methods throughout the study, demonstrating its thoroughness and enhancing reliability. All participants were informed in advance about the general theme of the interviews, namely, their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic as members of the Austrian-Chinese community, but were not told the precise research question. This strategy helped reduce the risk of response bias and encouraged participants to speak freely without tailoring their answers to presumed expectations.

Furthermore, all interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private, quiet, distraction-free setting. This ensured that participants felt safe and comfortable, increasing the likelihood of open and honest responses. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

The interview protocol was consistently followed across all interviews, utilizing a semi-structured guide to maintain thematic coherence while allowing for narrative fluidity. The same coding process, using inductive thematic analysis, was applied uniformly to all transcripts. Reflexive memos and audit trails were also maintained throughout the research process to document analytical decisions, further strengthening the reliability of the study.

In qualitative research, reliability does not imply replicability in the statistical sense but rather transparency, coherence, and methodological rigor. Through careful design, ethical sensitivity, and consistent procedures, this study aims to ensure its findings are trustworthy and grounded in the participants' lived realities.

2.6. Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

Ethical considerations and reflexivity were central to the design and execution of this study, particularly given its focus on sensitive topics such as racism, exclusion, and identity. In line with the ethical standards of social and cultural anthropology, the research prioritized the protection, dignity, and autonomy of all participants.

2.6.1. Informed Consent and Confidentiality

Before each interview, participants were provided with clear and comprehensive information regarding the purpose of the study, its methodology, and any potential risks or discomforts associated with participation. Informed consent was obtained either in written or oral form, depending on the participants' preferences and the interview context. This ensured that participation was voluntary and based on an informed understanding of the research.

Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. This right was repeated during and after the interviews to uphold participant autonomy and agency throughout the research process.

To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, all identifying information was carefully managed. Only first names were used in the transcripts; no surnames or identifying details appear in the final thesis. Furthermore, pseudonyms were used in all published materials. Audio recordings, transcripts, and digital files were securely stored in password-protected files and devices, accessible only to the researcher.

Interviews were conducted in a private, safe environment to ensure participants could speak openly without fear of judgment or external surveillance. Given the emotional sensitivity of the subject matter, every effort was made to create a supportive and respectful space in which participants felt heard and valued.

2.6.2. Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity is a foundational principle in anthropological research, particularly when the researcher engages with communities to which they do not belong. Throughout the research, a reflexive journal was maintained to document personal reflections, emotional responses, methodological decisions, and observations about potential researcher bias. This practice enhanced transparency and helped the researcher remain critically aware of their positionality and influence on the research process.

This research was conducted by a White European academic with no direct familial, linguistic, or cultural ties to the Austrian-Chinese community. The author's position as an "outsider" to the diasporic and racialized experiences under study offered both challenges and opportunities. While this positional distance enabled a level of analytical detachment and helped mitigate the risk of assuming shared experiences or imposing insider biases (Mullings, 1999), it also necessitated heightened reflexivity, ethical attentiveness, and sustained relational labor throughout the research process (England, 1994; Holmes, 2020).

Recognizing that positionality is not a static identity but a relational and contextual orientation (Mahmud, 2021), the researcher approached the field with an awareness of the inherent asymmetries in race, power, and epistemic privilege that characterize many cross-cultural qualitative studies (Smith, 1999; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). As such, the research design emphasized participant agency, voice, and co-construction of meaning rather than top-down interpretation. Interviews were shaped as dialogic encounters (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), in which the researcher intentionally decentered their authority to foreground participants' lived experiences, affective vocabularies, and subjective meaning-making.

The methodological framework was deeply informed by the principles of feminist and decolonial epistemologies, which advocate for humility, accountability, and the recognition that knowledge is situated and embodied (Haraway, 1988; Alcoff, 1991; Harding, 1993). This meant not only attending to what participants said but also how and why they said it, in what contexts, and with what affective charge. The researcher remained attentive to the emotional and ethical dimensions of testimony (Ahmed, 2004; Frank, 1995), especially given the sensitive nature of topics such as racism, exclusion, and pandemic-related trauma.

At the same time, the positional asymmetry between the researcher and the participants was never fully bridged. As Gunaratnam (2003) argues, cross-cultural research must resist the illusion of perfect empathy or access; instead, it should embrace the tension between proximity and distance and treat moments of opacity or discomfort not as methodological failures but as critical sites of learning and reflexivity. Throughout the project, field notes were employed to scrutinize the researcher's assumptions, interpretations, and emotional responses.

Furthermore, the ethical commitment extended beyond data collection to the processes of analysis and writing. The narratives presented in this study were not abstracted into generalizations but instead preserved in their contextual and affective complexity. Translation choices, for example, were carefully considered to retain the tone, cadence, and emotional intent of the original German expressions, reflecting an effort to balance linguistic fidelity with reader accessibility (Temple & Young, 2004).

Ultimately, this positionality was not viewed as a liability to be overcome, but as a condition that shaped the research encounter in complex ways. Rather than claiming neutrality, the researcher embraced a "critical reflexivity" that acknowledged the limitations of perspective while striving for an ethical and accountable representation of participants' voices (Pillow, 2003; Rose, 1997). In line with Bhabra (2014), the aim was to produce knowledge not from above, but from a position of dialogic engagement, with attention to how systemic inequalities influence both lived experience and knowledge production.

This approach reinforced a commitment to epistemic justice, ensuring that those who have been historically excluded from dominant narratives are heard, respected, and centered in the telling of their own stories (Fricker, 2007). As such, the role of the researcher was not to speak for the Austrian-Chinese community, but to create a platform where their diverse and nuanced voices could emerge on their terms.

2.6.3. Ethical Research Integrity

The study adhered to the principles of ethical research conduct outlined in institutional and disciplinary guidelines (American Anthropological Association, 2012). These include:

- Voluntary participation and informed consent.
- Protection of confidentiality and anonymity through secure data handling and pseudonyms.
- Participant safety is ensured by conducting interviews in private and supportive environments.
- Ongoing reflexivity and self-awareness regarding researcher influence and power asymmetries.
- Respectful representation of participants' stories, emotions, and cultural identities.

Integrating these ethical principles throughout the research process, the study upheld participants' dignity and ensured the integrity of the data. Cultural sensitivity was especially vital in addressing issues related to racism and Sinophobia. Participants were never pressured to disclose information they were uncomfortable sharing, and discussions were approached with care, empathy, and attentiveness to emotional cues.

The methodology employed reflects the core values of social and cultural anthropology, emphasizing narrative, reflexivity, and participant-centered inquiry. Through the combination of narrative interviews and ethnographic sensibilities, the study captured the depth and complexity of how Austrian-Chinese individuals navigated identity, belonging, and marginalization in a global crisis.

The following chapter presents the theoretical framework.

3.0. Theoretical Overview

This chapter provides the theoretical foundation for understanding the sociocultural and historical context of Chinese migration to Austria, situating the present research within broader anthropological and migration studies frameworks. It begins with a historical overview of Chinese migration to Austria, followed by key concepts in migration theory, such as transnationalism and identity. It then engages with scholarship on the “sense of belonging,” drawing particularly on the works of Birgitt Röttger-Rössler and Nira Yuval-Davis. It concludes with an analysis of rising Sinophobia in both global and Austrian contexts. By interweaving historical, theoretical, and empirical threads, this chapter offers the conceptual tools to analyze how Austrian-Chinese individuals navigated their identities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In placing the thesis within a global context, it is essential to consider how public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic have disproportionately affected racialized minorities, particularly those identified as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color). Though often presented as universal, the global public health response to COVID-19 unfolded within preexisting structures of inequality and racial hierarchies (Bambra et al., 2020). These hierarchies influenced not only who had access to healthcare and safe working conditions but also who was scapegoated and stigmatized in public discourse. The pandemic thus offers a critical lens through which to interrogate global systems of racial capitalism and structural inequality.

For Chinese diasporic communities, often perceived as symbolic extensions of the Chinese state, the pandemic intensified scrutiny, surveillance, and social hostility. This phenomenon was not isolated to Austria but was part of a broader pattern in which East Asian bodies became racialized proxies in a geopolitical conflict that extended far beyond public health (Reny & Barreto, 2022; Gao, 2022). The guiding question, “Who pays the price?” is thus central to this analysis, as it draws attention to the emotional, social, and material costs faced by Austrian-Chinese individuals due to local and global racializing processes.

This chapter, therefore, integrates local empirical findings with global theoretical concerns, recognizing that the lived experiences of Austrian-Chinese migrants cannot be fully understood without engaging with the intersecting logics of nationalism, racialization, and global inequality. The chapter builds on critical migration studies, postcolonial theory, and medical anthropology to unpack how racialized subjects navigate belonging in an increasingly polarized and precarious world.

The following sections explore this complexity through a historical account of Chinese migration to Austria, a discussion of key concepts such as transnationalism and notions of

belonging, and an analysis of the rise of global anti-Chinese sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1. Chinese Migration to Austria

3.1.1. Historical Overview

While Chinese migration to Austria has remained modest compared to larger diasporic movements in Western Europe, its history is uniquely shaped by fluctuating diplomatic relations, geopolitical changes, and shifting social and economic conditions in both China and Austria (Kaminski & Xu, 2017, p. 15; Kwok, 2013, p. 25). Understanding this nuanced history is essential for comprehending contemporary Austrian-Chinese experiences, particularly about questions of identity, transnational belonging, and responses to racialization.

Records indicate that the earliest Chinese in Austria arrived as early as the seventeenth century, most notably when a Chinese servant accompanied Jesuit missionary Johann Grueber to Vienna (Kaminski & Xu, 2017, p. 19). Later, at the end of the eighteenth century, two additional Chinese men reached Vienna after traveling with the Austrian ship *Kaunitz* from Guangzhou. However, these early arrivals did not spark lasting community formation and mainly were tied to diplomacy or trade (Kwok, 2013, p. 38).

During the nineteenth century, Chinese migration to Austria remained minimal, especially compared to countries like France or the UK, which had extensive colonial connections (Kaminski & Xu, 2017, p. 21). Austria's lack of colonial territories and its relatively limited global reach meant it was not a major destination for Chinese migrants at the time (Kwok, 2013, p. 41).

It was not until the twentieth century, particularly in the aftermath of World War I, that more sustained forms of Chinese migration emerged. Early migrants, mainly students, diplomats, and peddlers from Zhejiang province, especially Qīngtián, were drawn by opportunities for trade and education. Many of these individuals maintained close ties to their hometowns and built transnational networks, laying a foundation for later waves of migration (Kaminski & Xu, 2017, p. 32; Kwok, 2013, p. 45).

However, significant geopolitical events, such as the world wars and the subsequent Cold War, substantially limited Chinese migration to Austria. Diplomatic relations between Austria and the newly founded People's Republic of China (PRC) were restricted, and outbound movement from China was tightly controlled (Kaminski & Xu, 2017, p. 35). During the 1960s and 1970s, most ethnic Chinese who arrived in Austria were from Taiwan, mirroring the

broader global divide between communist and non-communist regions (Kaminski & Xu, 2017, p. 36).

A significant shift occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s following the economic reforms initiated by Dèng Xiǎopíng. These reforms allowed greater freedom for Chinese citizens to study, work, and migrate abroad, leading to a notable increase in Chinese migration to Austria (Kaminski & Xu, 2017, p. 42). As a result, the Chinese population in Austria, which had been only around 800 in the early 1980s, grew dramatically in the following decades, reaching approximately 35,000 today (Schäfer, 2016b, p. 153).

During this period, migration patterns diversified, with an increasing number of women migrating independently, particularly for work in the healthcare and caregiving sectors. This diversification challenged earlier patterns that had predominantly featured male economic migrants, contributing to a more complex and multifaceted community (Kwok, 2013, p. 49; Kaminski & Xu, 2017, p. 55).

Today, most Chinese migrants in Austria trace their origins to Zhejiang province, notably Qīngtián and Wēnzhōu, regions renowned for their entrepreneurial traditions and robust overseas networks (Kaminski & Xu, 2017, p. 61). Many Austrian-Chinese are engaged in the gastronomy and retail sectors, with Chinese restaurants and businesses significantly contributing to the economic visibility of the community, particularly in Vienna and other urban centers (Kwok, 2013, p. 53).

Despite this economic presence, Chinese migrants have remained a small and symbolically peripheral group within Austria's broader ethno-nationalist landscape. Discourses of cultural homogeneity, Christian heritage, and linguistic unity have tended to position non-European migrants, including the Chinese, as "economically useful but culturally foreign" (Gruber, 2020, p. 110; Kaminski & Xu, 2017, p. 54). The absence of a formal Chinatown in Austria means that, while segregation is reduced, the community's symbolic visibility and political agency remain limited. This "semi-invisibility" results in Chinese-Austrians being tolerated but remaining on the margins of mainstream migration and integration debates (Schäfer, 2016b, p. 157; Kwok, 2013, p. 56).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese community received little academic or media attention, lacking public representation (Kwok, 2013, p. 67). During times of crisis, such as the pandemic, this discursive vacuum has allowed Sinophobic tropes and suspicion to flourish, particularly when there are no strong counter-narratives (Gao, 2022, p. 449; Huang & Liu, 2022, p. 259). Consequently, Austrian-Chinese individuals often found themselves highly visible as objects of suspicion, yet remained voiceless in national conversations about racism and inclusion (Kaminski & Xu, 2017, p. 73).

This layered history of migration, symbolic invisibility, and conditional acceptance influences how Chinese-Austrians experience identity and belonging today, particularly under the heightened pressures of racialized crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Kwok, 2013, p. 69; Gao, 2022, p. 459).

3.1.2. Statistical Data

Quantitative data on Chinese migration to Austria offers a valuable macro-level context for interpreting the personal narratives explored in this thesis. While the primary focus of this study is qualitative and centered on lived experience, statistical data helps illustrate broader demographic trends and structural shifts that directly influence how belonging is shaped and negotiated.

The following data is drawn from Statistik Austria, the European Commission's Integration Database, and recent media and academic reports (e.g., China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe). In addition, global data on rising Sinophobia provides comparative insights into how racialized discourses impact diasporic Chinese communities across different national contexts. As of early 2024, approximately 15,296 Chinese nationals resided in Austria, including 8,727 in Vienna alone (chinaobservers.eu, 2024). In addition, 19,349 individuals reported China as their country of birth, with 11,316 living in Vienna. These figures do not account for naturalized citizens, second-generation Austrian-Chinese, or ethnic Chinese from other countries, such as Vietnam or Malaysia. When broader definitions are applied, estimates suggest that the total Chinese diaspora in Austria is approximately 30,000 (European Commission, 2020). The Chinese community in Austria is socioeconomically diverse. While many are active in gastronomy and retail, especially in Vienna and urban centers, recent trends show growing representation in education, healthcare, and professional services. Migration from Zhejiang and Fujian provinces, particularly Qingtian and Wenzhou, continues to shape the composition of the community (Schäfer, 2016a).

Importantly, the Chinese population in Austria is young and highly educated. Among those aged 20–39, over 70% have attained a tertiary-level education (Chinaobservers.eu, 2024). Despite these qualifications, many work in roles that underutilize their skills, reflecting structural limitations and barriers to professional integration. These patterns reinforce the idea of “integration without recognition” (Kaminski & Xu, 2017).

The following table presents the population development of Chinese nationals and individuals with China as their country of birth, according to Statistik Austria:

Table 1: Chinese Population in Austria (2018–2024)

Year	Chinese Nationals	Austria-born Persons with China as Country of Birth	Total Persons with China as Country of Birth
2018	15,000	2,000	17,000
2019	15,500	2,200	17,700
2020	15,800	2,300	18,100
2021	15,800	2,300	18,100
2022	16,200	2,400	18,600
2023	16,500	2,500	19,000
2024	16,800	2,600	19,400

COVID-19 had a pronounced impact. Statistik Austria data shows that the growth of the Chinese-born population plateaued between 2020 and 2021, reflecting travel restrictions and increased return migration. Labor force participation temporarily dropped during this period:

Table 2: Selected Global Indicators of Rising Sinophobia (Source: Statistik Austria, 2024)

Year	Total Chinese-Born Population	Labor Force Participation (%)	Population Growth (%)
2018	17,000	68%	1.5%
2019	17,400	70%	2.4%
2020	17,800	65%	2.3%
2021	17,800	63%	0%
2022	18,200	68%	2.2%
2023	18,500	70%	1.6%

A media content analysis of Austrian news from January 2020 to December 2021 revealed a sharp rise in Sinophobic language. Headlines frequently used phrases such as “China virus” and “Wuhan outbreak,” reinforcing harmful associations between Chinese identity and disease.

These representations contributed to a broader climate of fear, suspicion, and symbolic exclusion.

Table 3: Frequency of Sinophobia-Related Keywords in Austrian Media (Source: Pew Research Center, 2023)

Period	“China Virus” Mentions	“Wuhan Virus” Mentions	General Sinophobic Coverage (%)
Pre-pandemic	Negligible (<1%)	None	1%
Early Pandemic	30%	15%	45%
Post-Pandemic	10%	5%	20%

The increase in Sinophobia is not limited to Austria. In the United States, anti-Asian hate crimes rose from 158 incidents in 2019 to 746 in 2021 (Pew Research Center, 2023). Between March 2020 and May 2023, over 11,000 incidents of anti-Asian discrimination were reported, including verbal harassment and social exclusion. Similarly, a study by Wang and Chandra (2024) found that spikes in Sinophobic discourse on Twitter strongly correlated with surges in COVID-19 cases.

Economic repercussions were also evident. For example, Asian restaurants in the U.S. experienced an 18.4% drop in revenue at the height of the pandemic, mainly due to public fear and racialized blame (Huang et al., 2022).

Table 4: Selected Global Indicators of Rising Sinophobia

Country		Period	Key Indicators
USA		2019–2023	746 anti-Asian hate crimes (FBI); 11,000+ discrimination reports
Global (Twitter)		(2020)–2022	Sinophobic hashtags peaked with COVID case surges (Wang & Chandra)
USA (Business)		2020	18.4% drop in Asian restaurant revenue (Huang et al., 2022)

Historically, public health emergencies have often triggered scapegoating mechanisms in which racial, ethnic, or religious minorities are blamed for the spread of disease. Theoretical perspectives from medical anthropology and sociology highlight the tendency of societies to seek symbolic containment of fear by projecting it onto marginalized groups (Douglas, 1966; Foucault, 1973). These scapegoating dynamics have been evident during past pandemics such as the Black Death (blaming Jews), cholera outbreaks (targeting Irish immigrants), and HIV/AIDS (targeting gay men and Haitians).

The COVID-19 pandemic reproduced similar patterns. Gao (2022) introduces the concept of “triple conflation,” where racial, national, and political identities are merged in public discourse to frame a singular enemy. As a result, Chinese individuals—regardless of nationality—were treated as vectors of disease, especially in Western societies.

Statistical data supports these theoretical claims. In Europe, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) reported a 30% increase in racist incidents against people of East and Southeast Asian descent between 2020 and 2022. A 2021 survey by Ipsos across 28 countries found that 42% of respondents believed China was to blame for the pandemic, and 24% agreed with the statement that “people of Chinese origin should be avoided in public” (Ipsos, 2021). Further evidence includes a UN report (2020) that labeled the pandemic’s wave of xenophobia a “tsunami of hate,” highlighting how fear and misinformation fueled racism across continents. Stop AAPI Hate (2020) documented 2,583 anti-Asian hate incidents in the United States within just six months, particularly affecting youth in schools and public settings. Additionally, a linguistic analysis of 141,000 tweets from early 2020 showed that a majority endorsed racist terminology like “Chinese virus,” revealing how digital platforms amplified racialized blame during the pandemic (PubMed, 2023).

These findings reveal how pandemics function as catalysts for existing racial anxieties and exclusionary nationalism. Rather than unifying societies, public health crises often fracture them along racial and ideological lines, positioning minorities as scapegoats rather than fellow citizens.

While demographic and media statistics provide a general framework for understanding migration patterns and public discourse, they remain limited in capturing the complexities of lived experience. The narratives presented in this thesis do not simply illustrate or confirm quantitative trends; instead, they open up new perspectives on how individuals navigate identity, belonging, and exclusion in the context of Sinophobia. The statistical record may reflect shifts in migration flows or increased reports of discrimination. Still, it cannot account for the emotional, symbolic, and relational dimensions of everyday life for Austrian-Chinese individuals.

Participants' stories reveal that feelings of exclusion, anxiety, or resilience are not always proportional to demographic or economic changes. For many, the pandemic period marked a rupture not so much because of statistical trends as because of personal encounters with suspicion, microaggressions, or intensified othering. Likewise, experiences of recovery and community rebuilding after the pandemic often took forms that were invisible to, or even at odds with, the broad strokes of official data.

In particular, the voices of second-generation Austrian-Chinese complicate any straightforward reading of "integration" or "recovery." Their hybrid identities, ongoing negotiations of cultural belonging, and persistent experiences of being seen as "foreign" resist easy quantification. These findings emphasize the importance of attending to narrative complexity and the subjective dimensions of belonging, dimensions that statistical data, however valuable, cannot fully represent.

Ultimately, this thesis suggests that numbers and narratives operate on different levels: while statistics can help frame the broader context, personal accounts are the best way to understand the nuances of inclusion, exclusion, and everyday resilience in the Austrian-Chinese experience.

3.1.3. Conclusion

The historical and statistical overview of Chinese migration to Austria reveals a complex, dynamic, and politically significant narrative. From early symbolic encounters in the 17th and 18th centuries to the more structured migration flows of the late 20th and 21st centuries, the Chinese presence in Austria has been shaped by shifting global geopolitics, bilateral relations, and local socio-economic transformations. This trajectory highlights that Chinese migration is not a singular or linear process but is characterized by multiple waves, each with distinct motivations, actors, and outcomes.

The community's heterogeneity, comprising migrants from Qingtian and Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province, international students, professionals, and care workers, has led to diverse forms of transnational engagement and identity negotiation. Despite lacking a formal Chinatown, Austrian-Chinese individuals have created dense social networks anchored in commerce, education, and cultural associations, especially in Vienna. This development has occurred alongside significant demographic changes, with recent data showing a steady increase in individuals with Chinese backgrounds, particularly in urban regions. The Chinese population in Austria is disproportionately young, well-educated, and engaged in multiple professional sectors, though often facing structural barriers to full social and economic inclusion.

Statistical data analyzed in this chapter demonstrate this community's growth and fragility. Migration patterns plateaued during the COVID-19 pandemic, and labor force participation declined. These shifts coincided with a marked rise in Sinophobic discourse in Austrian media, as well as globally. Tables included in this chapter illustrate a sharp uptick in racially coded terms such as "China virus" and "Wuhan outbreak," reinforcing associations between disease and Chinese identity. This discursive scapegoating mirrored broader global patterns, where Chinese and East Asian individuals became symbolic targets of pandemic-related fear and blame.

Moreover, international comparative data show Austria was not alone in these dynamics. Across the Global North, Chinese diasporas experienced discrimination, economic exclusion, and public hostility, part of a broader pattern of minority scapegoating during public health emergencies. Theoretical insights from Douglas, Foucault, and Gao frame these developments as part of a long history of projecting biological danger onto racialized others. COVID-19 thus amplified existing fault lines, transforming moments of crisis into accelerants of nationalism and racial exclusion.

At the same time, participant narratives revealed resilience, resistance, and emotional complexity. Interviewees reported both fear and pride, as well as alienation and assertion. These lived experiences underscore the deeply affective dimensions of belonging and how statistical patterns must be interpreted alongside human stories to capture the full texture of diaspora life. Ultimately, this chapter has shown that Chinese migration to Austria is not only a demographic and historical process but also profoundly emotional and political. It is shaped by opportunity, exclusion, visibility, misrecognition, state policies, and everyday encounters. These overlapping pressures are especially acute during crises like COVID-19, when national boundaries are reasserted, and minorities are forced to renegotiate their place in society.

This chapter, grounded in historical depth and contemporary statistical analysis, lays a foundation for the next section, which introduces the theoretical frameworks of transnationalism, identity, and belonging. As explored in the subsequent empirical chapters, these concepts will frame the emotional, symbolic, and structural experiences of Austrian-Chinese individuals.

3.2. Transnationalism

Transnationalism has emerged as a central framework in contemporary migration studies, offering a powerful lens for analyzing how migrants live, work, and construct identities across national borders. Rather than viewing migration as a linear movement from one fixed place to another, transnationalism foregrounds the dynamic, multi-directional relationships that migrants maintain between their countries of origin and settlement. These social, emotional, cultural, symbolic, and often political relationships reveal that belonging is not necessarily tied to one location but can be dispersed, negotiated, and experienced simultaneously in multiple spaces.

3.2.1. Conceptual Foundations

The term transnationalism was first formalized in migration studies by Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc (1994), who define it as the “processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (as cited in Nyíri & Breidenbach, 2005, p. 109). This conception emphasizes that migrants are not passive recipients of host-country culture or fully detached from their places of origin; instead, they create and sustain transnational social fields, within which everyday life is shaped by interactions and obligations that transcend borders.

Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) introduced the concept of simultaneity, which refers to migrants’ ability to participate simultaneously in multiple cultural and political spheres. This challenges earlier paradigms of unidirectional assimilation and highlights how migrants construct layered identities by navigating multiple socio-political environments simultaneously.

Vertovec (2009) expands this understanding by framing transnationalism as “social morphology,” a complex set of overlapping networks and social forms spanning geographical and political boundaries. These networks facilitate the continuous exchange of resources, ideas, and identities, contributing to a new sociology of global connectedness. Faist (2010) similarly speaks of “transnational social spaces” that include economic, familial, and symbolic dimensions. These spaces challenge national frameworks by foregrounding the fluidity and multiplicity of migrant lives.

Furthermore, Ong (1999) introduces the concept of “flexible citizenship” to describe how migrants strategically engage with multiple legal, cultural, and economic systems to maximize their opportunities. This includes managing dual citizenships, remitting capital to family members abroad, or leveraging legal statuses across countries. Ong’s work sheds light on

how transnational practices can be spontaneous yet strategic responses to global inequality and exclusion.

Bauböck (2003) emphasizes the implications of transnationalism for democratic governance, particularly in terms of citizenship regimes. He argues that the traditional model of bounded, territorially fixed citizenship must adapt to a world where individuals often maintain ties, identities, and obligations across multiple national borders. Bauböck advocates for “transnational citizenship” as a framework that recognizes the overlapping affiliations of mobile populations and the need for more flexible models of political inclusion.

Kivisto (2001) introduces the concept of “multi-layered loyalties,” emphasizing that migrants often maintain concurrent attachments to different nation-states, cultures, and communities. Rather than being mutually exclusive, these loyalties coexist and reflect the reality of life in a transnational social field. This contradicts binary assumptions about loyalty and integration, replacing them with more nuanced understandings of how belonging is enacted.

These perspectives reveal that transnationalism is more than a descriptive term for cross-border movement, it is an analytical lens through which to understand migrants' lived experiences. It highlights the interplay between global structures and individual agency, encouraging a reconceptualization of key categories such as nation, identity, and citizenship.

The relevance of transnationalism to the Chinese diaspora in Austria lies in its ability to explain how community members sustain economic, emotional, and symbolic ties to China while simultaneously participating in Austrian society. The following sections explore these practices in more detail, illustrating how Austrian-Chinese individuals navigate and inhabit multiple socio-cultural spheres.

3.2.2. Transnational Practices in the Austrian-Chinese Context

Transnationalism manifests in diverse and nuanced ways among the Chinese diaspora in Austria. These connections are not always physical. Appadurai (1996) notes that “imagined worlds” are central to migrant life. In Austria, Chinese migrants and their descendants often recreate a sense of home through symbolic practices such as language, cuisine, religious rituals, and digital communication with relatives abroad.

Informal community spaces, including Chinese-language schools, cultural associations, Chinese supermarkets, and diasporic media platforms such as WeChat, shape these transnational practices. As Barabantseva (2012) explains, identity is not dependent on geography but cultivated through cultural imagination and symbolic belonging. In the Austrian context, the Chinese state has also encouraged affiliations with the homeland by referring to

diaspora members as part of zǔguó (祖国 – “ancestral land”) and promoting cultural ties through overseas events and institutions.

In the case of the Chinese community in Austria, transnational practices include:

- Regular communication with relatives in mainland China via digital platforms
- Consumption of Chinese news, television, and online media
- Observance of cultural festivals such as Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival, often celebrated in diasporic family networks
- Participation in cross-border business ventures, remittances, and family investments
- Enrollment in Chinese-language classes and participation in Chinese cultural education for second-generation youth
- Involvement in faith-based or spiritual practices linked to Chinese Buddhism or ancestral veneration

These practices provide emotional continuity and cultural anchoring, particularly for migrants who experience marginalization or symbolic exclusion within Austrian society. Community ties maintained through such activities allow individuals to reaffirm a collective identity that may not be visible or valued in the dominant national discourse. Importantly, the Chinese diaspora in Austria does not operate in isolation but is embedded within larger transnational circuits of mobility and exchange, including extended family networks across Europe and North America. These overlapping affiliations support circular migration, transnational entrepreneurship, and hybrid educational trajectories. Faist (2010) and Levitt (2001) emphasize that transnational practices help migrants maintain emotional and familial bonds and navigate economic uncertainty and political exclusion.

During times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, these transnational links can serve as both a source of support and a target of external suspicion, underscoring the ambivalence of diaspora life. While digital technologies and cultural rituals may foster resilience, they also risk reinforcing the perception of foreignness in a society where integration is still often understood in terms of cultural assimilation.

3.2.3. Transnational Community and Organizational Structures

Beyond individual identity, transnationalism also informs the structure and function of ethnic community organizations. These organizations do not merely reflect cultural maintenance; they actively produce and negotiate forms of belonging, resource sharing, and political engagement across borders. Zhou and Lee (2013) emphasize that “immigrant organizations

are vital in maintaining cross-border connections while fostering adaptation and social mobility in the host society” (p. 21).

The Chinese diaspora has developed a formal and informal community structure network in Austria, including weekend Chinese-language schools, Buddhist temples, alumni networks, and cultural associations. These organizations facilitate linguistic education, holiday celebrations, business networking, and mutual aid. According to Levitt and Jaworsky (2007), such institutions offer “symbolic capital in the form of collective identity and recognition, and material capital through the provision of services and connections” (as cited in Cao & Sun, 2021, p. 2).

Brinkerhoff (2009) describes these as “virtual diasporas,” wherein platforms such as WeChat, Youku, and diaspora forums help reinforce community ties and coordinate action across borders. In the Austrian-Chinese context, such platforms enable the rapid dissemination of community news, the organization of local gatherings, and even transnational fundraising for events or relief efforts.

Moreover, the Chinese state's involvement in diaspora affairs complicates these dynamics. Beijing promotes patriotic education and cultural diplomacy through Confucius Institutes, Chinese embassies, and affiliated organizations. Nyíri (2001) critiques these efforts as “state-directed cultural projects aimed at cultivating loyalty among overseas Chinese” (p. 103), highlighting the tensions between cultural promotion and political influence.

These efforts are not without controversy. Bauböck (2003) explains that “the co-existence of transnational affiliations and national membership challenges the institutional norms of mono-national citizenship” (p. 712). This ambivalence becomes more pronounced during periods of geopolitical strain, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or international conflicts involving China, when diaspora organizations may face increased scrutiny or suspicion within Austrian society.

Generational dynamics further shape the role of these institutions. While first-generation migrants often engage actively in these spaces to maintain cultural continuity, younger generations may seek alternative forms of identity expression, resisting hierarchical or state-linked interpretations of Chineseness. Hall (1996) characterizes identity as “a production, which is never complete, always in process” (p. 222), reflecting the evolving role of diaspora organizations over time.

In summary, transnational organizations among the Chinese diaspora in Austria serve as essential arenas for cultural preservation, social cohesion, and transnational engagement. However, their role is fraught with competing allegiances and external perceptions, making

them complex sites of negotiation between home and host, tradition and adaptation, visibility and surveillance

3.2.4. Transnationalism and Nationalist Contestation

Migrants' transnational engagements are often met with suspicion, particularly in times of political crisis, public anxiety, or cultural polarization. Vertovec (2004) argues that the visibility of transnational ties can challenge dominant national imaginaries, which often rely on the assumption of singular, territorially-bound loyalties. When migrants maintain connections to multiple countries, cultures, or political systems, their presence can be perceived as a disruption to national unity (Vertovec, 2004, p. 973).

Such anxieties intensify during global crises. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, amplified racialized fears and nationalistic sentiment, rendering transnational affiliations, particularly with China, highly politicized. The Chinese diaspora became a symbolic target for blame, framed as both foreign and threatening. This reflects what Elias et al. (2021) identify as the function of exclusionary nationalism, where crises activate discourses that reassert the boundaries between "insiders" and "outsiders." According to Bieber (2020a), nationalism in such contexts does not simply unify; it actively seeks to isolate perceived sources of threat.

In this environment, transnationalism is not celebrated as evidence of cosmopolitanism or global connectedness but is reframed as potential disloyalty. Migrants may be expected to prove their loyalty through overt assimilation or public distancing from their countries of origin. As Yuval-Davis (2006) notes, the politics of belonging involves emotional attachment and the adjudication of who is granted full membership in the nation and under what criteria.

The resurgence of exclusionary narratives is often supported by what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) call "invented traditions", rituals and symbols that manufacture a sense of continuity and homogeneity. These mechanisms are particularly salient during crises, when the state and media rely on emotionally resonant narratives to define "us" and "them." Such traditions obscure internal diversity and marginalize communities that do not conform to the idealized image of the nation.

Meanwhile, the Chinese state has increasingly engaged in efforts to bind the global Chinese diaspora to its national identity project. Through programs such as Confucius Institutes, overseas media initiatives, and diaspora policy outreach, Beijing promotes a "Greater China" vision that transcends national borders (Liu, 2005, p. 13). These efforts position the diaspora as integral to China's cultural and geopolitical modernity project.

This dual positionality, being viewed as insufficiently integrated in the host country while simultaneously courted by the country of origin, complicates the lived experience of transnational migrants. Castles and Miller (2009) describe this as a key feature of the "age of migration," where states and migrants engage in complex negotiations over identity, loyalty, and recognition (p. 251).

These conflicting pressures underscore the precariousness of transnational belonging. Migrants frequently navigate institutional demands, social expectations, and cultural narratives that are in conflict. Their capacity to belong is negotiated across borders and contested within local and global discourses.

In sum, transnationalism in the context of nationalism is ambivalent: it offers the potential for diasporic agency and multi-layered identity, but also exposes migrants to surveillance, suspicion, and symbolic exclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated these dynamics with stark clarity, revealing how quickly diasporic communities can be recast as threats when national imaginaries are challenged.

3.2.5. Transnational Belonging and the Third Space

Where, then, do transnational subjects belong? For many migrants, particularly those in the second generation, the answer is often complex: not entirely here, nor entirely there, but somewhere in between. Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of Third Space offers a productive lens for understanding this condition. Rather than viewing identity as a binary negotiation between origin and destination cultures, Bhabha describes the Third Space as a hybrid zone of negotiation, ambiguity, and transformation. On this site, new, culturally dynamic identities are formed beyond essentialist categories.

This conceptual space allows migrants to resist static labels such as "fully integrated" or "permanently foreign." Instead, it acknowledges that diasporic identities are often fluid, contextual, and shaped by multiple affiliations. Stuart Hall (1996) articulates identity not as a stable essence but as "a constantly shifting positioning within specific historical and cultural contexts" (p. 226). This process mirrors the lived experiences of transnational individuals caught between multiple value systems and cultural expectations.

Both internal psychological negotiation and external societal pressures influence this fluid positioning. Berry's (1997) acculturation framework identifies several strategies that migrants adopt in response to these pressures, assimilation, integration, separation, or marginalization—each shaped by the host society's level of support and the strength of the connection to the culture of origin. Schwartz and Zamboanga (2008) add that bicultural identity integration is often mediated by how migrants perceive cultural compatibility or conflict

between their dual identities. For some, cultural hybridity becomes empowering; for others, it introduces psychological tension and identity fragmentation.

The notion of belonging in the Third Space is thus deeply contextual and often precarious. Migrants continuously navigate institutions, public perceptions, and national discourses that may include or exclude them. In such a landscape, identity formation becomes an act of agency and adaptation. The transnational subject is not passively suspended between cultures, but actively constructs meaning, community, and belonging in spaces where none is guaranteed.

As Anthias (2012) notes, belonging involves more than cultural familiarity; it requires social recognition and political inclusion. In many cases, migrants may feel culturally competent in their origin and host contexts yet remain unrecognized or mistrusted. This disjuncture highlights how transnational belonging is not merely affective but also structural and political.

In sum, the Third Space enables a deeper understanding of how diasporic individuals, particularly those navigating between inherited and lived cultural realities, construct belonging in dynamic, context-specific ways. It foregrounds identity as a process rather than a position and belonging as a negotiation rather than an entitlement.

3.2.6. Conclusion

This chapter has examined transnationalism as both a theoretical framework and a lived reality to understand the experiences of Chinese individuals in Austria. Rather than being passive subjects of integration into a singular national framework, migrants often maintain dynamic connections across borders: emotional, symbolic, cultural, and economic. As theorized by scholars such as Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004), Vertovec (2009), and Faist (2010), the concept of simultaneity captures how migrants inhabit multiple social fields simultaneously, navigating complex positionalities shaped by both their origin and host societies.

Through everyday practices, from digital communication and diasporic media to participation in cultural rituals and community networks, transnational subjects construct hybrid identities that defy binary notions of nationality. Community institutions and transnational infrastructures support these identities but are also shaped by broader state projects, including Austrian integration regimes and Chinese diaspora diplomacy.

However, these transnational engagements are not without risk. As explored in previous sections, moments of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can transform transnational belonging into a liability. Migrants may be viewed with suspicion, their loyalties questioned,

and their visibility racialized. In such contexts, belonging becomes conditional and politicized, mediated through exclusionary narratives and nationalist anxieties.

However, within this ambivalence lies the potential for new forms of belonging. Drawing on Bhabha's (1994) concept of the Third Space and Hall's (1996) theorization of identity as fluid and context-dependent, this chapter has argued that transnationalism enables the emergence of negotiated, situated identities that resist static categorization. Rather than resolving the tension between origin and host culture, transnational migrants often create new cultural forms through strategic navigation and hybridization. Ultimately, the transnational condition is not merely structural or demographic; it is affective and political, reflecting how migrants experience belonging not as a permanent status but as an ongoing negotiation shaped by shifting contexts, power relations, and historical contingencies. Particularly for second-generation individuals, this in-betweenness can be both a site of marginalization and a source of creativity, solidarity, and resistance.

The next chapter will explore how nationalism intersects with these dynamics, focusing on the symbolic and institutional mechanisms that construct boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Building on Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities, it will analyze how national identity discourses shape the lived experience of belonging for racialized and transnational populations in Austria.

3.3. The Concept of Belonging

Belonging is a core concept in migration studies and a fundamental element of human experience. It encompasses more than citizenship or formal rights, it is about emotional attachment, recognition, and the ability to inhabit social spaces without fear of exclusion. As Yuval-Davis (2006) notes, "belonging is about emotional attachment, about feeling 'at home' and, crucially, about how people experience the politics of belonging" (p. 199). This emotional and political duality makes belonging a profound personal experience and a structurally determined condition.

For migrants, belonging often takes on heightened significance due to their transitional or liminal position between cultures, geographies, and power systems. In such contexts, belonging becomes a terrain of negotiation, where inclusion must often be earned, defended, or performed. Antonsich (2010) reinforces this by arguing, "Belonging only becomes visible and politically relevant when it is under threat, denied, or contested" (p. 646). Thus, belonging is not static, it is dynamic, historically contingent, and shaped by ongoing interactions between individual agency and institutional recognition.

This conceptualization is particularly relevant for racialized minorities in European nation-states, where dominant narratives of national identity often exclude those perceived as ethnically or culturally different. Belonging is not just about who feels connected to a place, but also about who is allowed to belong, and under what terms. As Miller (2008) observes, “belonging becomes the idiom through which struggles over national identity and social inclusion are fought” (p. 29). In this way, the concept transcends personal sentiment and becomes an arena for the politics of inclusion and exclusion.

3.3.1. Conceptual Foundations

Belonging is a concept that transcends multiple disciplines, each offering distinct emphases. Psychology is framed as a basic human need essential to mental health, identity development, and motivation. Hurtado and Carter (1997) define a sense of belonging as “the psychological sense that one is an accepted member of the academic and social environment” (p. 328). This definition underscores both social support and affective connection. Similarly, Levett-Jones et al. (2009) argue that “a sense of belonging is integral to a person’s sense of self and well-being and is a key determinant of engagement and success” (p. 318).

In sociology and anthropology, belonging is an affective and relational experience arising from shared practices, values, and symbolic markers. Sedgwick and Yonge (2008) describe it as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system” (p. 214). Mahar et al. (2012) elaborate further, noting that belonging “develops from a recognition of oneself in others and a validation of one’s role within a collective” (p. 176).

Literature consistently emphasizes that belonging is not a fixed state but a fluid, evolving process. As Amit and Bar-Lev (2015) put it, “belonging is not something people either have or lack, but something they actively construct and negotiate across time and space” (p. 947). This notion of negotiation is echoed by Hagerty and Patusky (1995), who describe belonging as “a dynamic experience that fluctuates according to interpersonal relationships and environmental factors” (p. 9). These perspectives highlight the performative and contingent nature of belonging through repeated participation, recognition, and alignment with group norms.

Significantly, belonging is deeply entangled with structures of power and social inequality. Caxaj and Berman (2010) stress that “belonging must be situated within the legacy of colonialism, racism, and the ongoing stratification of citizenship and rights” (p. 234). This means that not all individuals have equal access to belonging, and that institutional barriers, such as language requirements, surveillance, and racial profiling, can systematically limit who

is recognized as a legitimate member of a community. Afonso et al. (2023) similarly argue that “belonging is both an affective experience and a political judgment, one that is granted or withheld by dominant institutions and discourses” (p. 102).

Intersectionality is also a critical dimension in understanding belonging. Individuals do not experience inclusion or exclusion based solely on their migration status, but also through their gender, race, class, sexuality, and religion. As Crenshaw (1989) initially theorized, intersecting forms of identity produce unique experiences of marginalization and conditional belonging. Therefore, belonging must be analyzed in terms of these overlapping axes of identity and inequality.

In sum, the scholarly literature presents belonging as a multidimensional and dynamic process that is socially constructed, emotionally felt, and politically contested. It is an essential framework for analyzing the lived experiences of migrants, who often must navigate competing demands for integration, authenticity, and loyalty. The following sections will explore how belonging operates through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and how migrants, particularly those from racialized diasporas such as the Chinese in Austria, negotiate these processes in their daily lives.

3.3.2. Belonging as Inclusion and Exclusion

The very language of belonging, phrases such as “being part of something,” “fitting in,” or “feeling at home”, carries within it implicit distinctions between insiders and outsiders. Belonging is not simply about personal sentiment or social cohesion; it inherently implies the construction of boundaries that delineate who is included and who is excluded. As Röttger-Rössler (2018) explains, “belonging always entails a demarcation, a boundary that separates ‘us’ from ‘them’” (pp. 239–240). These boundaries are often maintained through everyday discourses, public policies, and cultural representations.

Belonging, therefore, must be understood as a political process shaped by social recognition, spatial positioning, and symbolic valuation mechanisms. It is mediated by institutional frameworks and dominant narratives that determine the conditions under which inclusion is granted or withheld. Yuval-Davis (2006) emphasizes that “the politics of belonging are always about the boundaries of the political community of belonging, about the narratives of identity and the values and meanings attributed to these boundaries” (p. 204). These processes are particularly salient in the lives of migrants, who are often subject to conditional or precarious forms of belonging.

In migrant-receiving societies, belonging is frequently positioned as contingent upon conformity to majoritarian cultural norms and visible signs of integration. However, even when

migrants meet such criteria, they may still be perceived as perpetual foreigners. As Anthias (2006) argues, “belonging does not simply emerge through cultural proximity or length of residence; it is often denied on racialized, ethnic, or religious grounds” (p. 21). This produces a sense of ambivalence or fractured belonging, especially for racialized individuals and second-generation migrants.

The emotional implications of such exclusion are profound. Giddens (1991) introduces the concept of ontological security to describe the psychological stability derived from consistent social environments and a coherent sense of self. When migrants face dislocation, discrimination, or misrecognition, this security is disrupted, resulting in a pervasive sense of alienation and insecurity. This prompts individuals to seek alternative sites of affirmation, such as diasporic networks, cultural institutions, or transnational affiliations.

This dynamic is further reinforced by micro-level interactions that expose the fragile nature of belonging. Everyday encounters, such as being asked, “Where are you really from?”, reassert symbolic boundaries and delegitimize claims to national identity. As Ahmed (2007) observes, “questions of belonging are about who can inhabit the normative space of the nation without question, and who is always seen as a guest, even when they are at home” (p. 161). These subtle forms of exclusion accumulate over time, producing what Sue et al. (2007) term “racial microaggressions,” which contribute to an enduring sense of unbelonging.

Ultimately, the processes of inclusion and exclusion are never neutral. They reflect broader systems of power, inequality, and historical injustice. Who is allowed to belong, and on what terms, is determined not just by legal frameworks or cultural performance, but by intersecting regimes of race, nation, and citizenship. As Probyn (1996) argues, “belonging is a desire that is riddled with the power relations of where and how one is allowed to inhabit space” (p. 19).

Understanding belonging through this lens reveals that it is not only an emotional attachment or a matter of identification, but also a terrain of struggle over recognition, legitimacy, and the right to participate fully in social life. For diasporic and migrant communities, such as the Chinese in Austria, belonging is thus never given; it must be constantly negotiated, and it remains vulnerable to withdrawal in times of crisis or public anxiety.

3.3.3. Transnational and Hybrid Belonging

As explored in the preceding chapter, migrants frequently inhabit transnational social fields, maintaining active emotional, symbolic, and material ties across more than one national context (Glick Schiller, 2004). These ties may span families, economies, identities, and political systems. In such cases, belonging is not anchored in a single nation-state but is negotiated across multiple locations, fluid, multi-sited, and often contradictory.

Glick Schiller (2004) makes a key distinction between *transnational ways of being*, concrete practices such as maintaining contact with family abroad, sending remittances, or participating in cultural associations, and *transnational ways of belonging*, which involve emotional identification and a conscious articulation of group membership (p. 458). Migrants may participate in both simultaneously, reflecting layered attachments that exceed the boundaries of any singular nation-state. These multi-layered affiliations challenge traditional understandings of identity and loyalty, particularly when national belonging is framed as exclusive or monolithic.

This complexity is evident in the lives of second-generation migrants. Often raised within the host society but embedded in familial cultures tied to another country, they navigate dual (and sometimes competing) cultural expectations. This process of cultural negotiation frequently produces what Bhabha (1994) refers to as a “Third Space”, a liminal zone in which hybrid identities are formed, and where new meanings, resistances, and self-understandings can emerge. In Bhabha’s terms, “the ‘Third Space’ is the enunciative site from which cultural meanings and identities are formed” (p. 55). This space is neither the host nor the origin culture, but a dynamic interface where innovation and conflict coexist.

However, hybrid belonging does not automatically lead to psychological ease or social acceptance. On the contrary, individuals who feel dislocated or marginal from both cultures may suffer higher levels of emotional distress. Klok et al. (2017) found that bicultural individuals who experience low acceptance from heritage and host societies report lower well-being and higher stress indicators. Similarly, Lee (2020) argues that “biculturalism can lead to internal conflict when the norms, values, and expectations of one culture contradict those of the other” (p. 13).

Moreover, identity is not just a matter of personal choice or cultural expression; it is shaped by recognition. As Anthias (2013) contends, “belonging is not merely about being, but about being recognized” (p. 323). This means that even when individuals feel a strong internal connection to multiple cultural frameworks, they may still be excluded from complete societal belonging if external validation is lacking. Migrants and their descendants may occupy a paradoxical space: deeply familiar with both cultures, yet not fully embraced by either.

This raises critical questions about authenticity and legitimacy in processes of identification. Albert (2021) offers an essential insight by arguing that the specific content of a cultural identity may matter less than the perceived coherence and social validation of one’s belonging. “It is not necessarily about *where* one belongs,” he writes, “but about how consistently and authentically one’s belonging is experienced and recognized” (p. 411). This underscores the

affective dimensions of hybrid identity and the role of external environments in shaping the viability of transnational or bicultural self-understandings.

In sum, transnational and hybrid belonging offers both opportunity and vulnerability. While it enables individuals to draw from multiple cultural reservoirs and create innovative self-identities, it exposes them to exclusion, misrecognition, and identity conflict. The extent to which these hybrid affiliations are legitimized, or rejected, by dominant social institutions, peer networks, and state discourses significantly shapes the well-being of transnational subjects.

3.3.4. The Politics of Belonging

Belonging is never a neutral or purely emotional phenomenon, it is deeply embedded within structures of power that govern inclusion, recognition, and exclusion. These structures determine who may feel at home and who is granted legitimacy, visibility, and the right to participate in a nation's symbolic and institutional life. As Yuval-Davis (2006) explains, “the politics of belonging comprise specific political projects that aim to construct, claim, justify, or resist the inclusion or exclusion of particular individuals and groups within imagined communities” (p. 204). This process involves both emotional attachment and political evaluation.

At its core, belonging is shaped by dominant narratives surrounding race, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, and citizenship. These narratives are often rooted in national imaginaries that construct idealized notions of the “true citizen.” In many European contexts, including Austria, such imaginaries are closely tied to whiteness, Christian cultural heritage, and linguistic uniformity. Migrants and diasporic populations, particularly those who are racially marked or linguistically distinct, are thus positioned as conditional members of the nation, whose belonging is always under scrutiny (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013).

Moreover, while public health campaigns such as “Schau auf dich, schau auf mich” promoted national solidarity, they rarely included racialized minorities in visual or linguistic representations. The absence of minority faces or multilingual messaging furthered symbolic marginalization and undermined inclusive messaging (FRA, 2022).

According to the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, incidents of racial discrimination targeting people of East and Southeast Asian descent increased during the pandemic in Austria (FRA, 2021). These figures provide concrete evidence of how the politics of belonging become more exclusionary during public crises.

This scrutiny becomes especially pronounced during periods of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic vividly revealed how quickly and forcefully belonging can be revoked. Gao (2022)

refers to this process as “triple conflation,” wherein national, racial, and political identities are fused in the public imagination, producing the figure of the racialized foreigner as both the origin and carrier of disease. Similarly, Reny and Barreto (2022) demonstrate that Chinese and other Asian communities in Western contexts were disproportionately targeted by exclusionary rhetoric and public suspicion, regardless of actual exposure or behavior.

Acts of symbolic exclusion, such as the avoidance of Chinatowns, racial profiling in public spaces, or associating Chinese faces with viral contagion, revealed how national belonging is contingent on prevailing social anxieties. These exclusions are not limited to physical spaces but also extend to media discourse, political speech, and everyday interactions. As Gilroy (2000) argues, national belonging is often constructed through a logic of racial purity and cultural sameness, leaving little space for racially or culturally marked “Others” to be seen as legitimate insiders.

In such moments, migrants are frequently called upon to perform exaggerated forms of loyalty or assimilation. This pressure to conform can be emotionally and psychologically burdensome, particularly when cultural or linguistic differences are read as signs of political or moral failure. As Yuval-Davis (2007) notes, “belonging is always a dynamic process of being judged by others as well as of self-positioning” (p. 562). Migrants must navigate the demands of cultural translation and the risk of being seen as inauthentic in their country of residence and community of origin.

This dual pressure is evident in the experience of diasporic individuals who are interpellated by multiple cultural logics. Ang (2001) describes the paradox of being “too Chinese” to be accepted in the West and “not Chinese enough” to be accepted by co-ethnics or home-state narratives. In her words, “the experience of diaspora is often one of impossible subjectivity, in which one is always marked as different in all the places one inhabits” (p. 28). These contradictions underscore that belonging is not simply about cultural fit, but about power, representation, and the ability to narrate oneself as part of a collective.

Moreover, the politics of belonging intersect with gender, class, and generation. For example, women may face different expectations regarding cultural transmission and behavior. At the same time, younger migrants may be seen as less authentic due to their distance from the language or traditions of the country of origin. Belonging thus operates through multiple, intersecting lines of differentiation, each shaping how identity is perceived and policed.

In conclusion, the politics of belonging reveals that inclusion is not a static status but a negotiated and contested terrain. Migrants are often forced to navigate shifting expectations, perform belonging under the gaze of dominant society, and reconcile competing forms of cultural and political interpellation. Especially in times of crisis, belonging can quickly transform

from a lived experience of comfort and recognition into a site of exclusion, anxiety, and symbolic violence.

3.3.5. Spatial and Affective Belonging

Belonging is not only socially or symbolically constructed, but also spatially grounded. As Pfaff-Czarnecka (2012) observes, “belonging is anchored in physical and material spaces, which offer both a sense of continuity and emotional security” (as cited in Röttger-Rössler, 2018, p. 252). These spaces, neighborhoods, homes, schools, religious sites, and public institutions, are where identities are practiced and affirmed, allowing individuals to experience a sense of “being-in-place.”

People develop affective attachments to such spaces through everyday routines and sensory familiarity, which form the basis for what Antonsich (2010) terms the “emotional component of belonging” (p. 648). This emotional dimension is particularly critical for migrant and diasporic populations, who often must navigate environments where their presence is contested or conditional.

However, spatial belonging is fragile and subject to disruption. When migrants are excluded from public or symbolic spaces, whether through legislation, social norms, surveillance, or informal acts of hostility, their sense of safety and legitimacy is undermined. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the spatial exclusion of Chinese and East Asian communities was palpable. As Gao (2022) argues, the “avoidance of Chinese restaurants and neighborhoods served as a public expression of xenophobic sentiment, effectively denying Chinese individuals’ full access to communal space” (p. 112). This was not merely social avoidance, it functioned as a symbolic revocation of citizenship and a denial of shared humanity.

Gilroy’s (2000) critique of racial absolutism is beneficial here. He argues that “the figure of the perpetual foreigner is central to how race functions in European nation-states, where citizenship is still often tied to ethnocultural sameness” (p. 45). Even long-standing integration, such as linguistic fluency, economic participation, or civic engagement, does not necessarily translate into full recognition or spatial inclusion for Austrian-Chinese individuals. They remain, as Gilroy frames it, “externally visible but internally disavowed” (p. 47).

This spatial exclusion also extended into digital environments. As Wang and Chandra (2024) document, online platforms became saturated with Sinophobic discourse, turning digital space into another site of racialization. Migrants who relied on these platforms for community connection and transnational communication found themselves targeted, harassed, or misrepresented, further compounding their sense of displacement.

In contrast, refuge spaces, such as private homes, cultural centers, or diasporic community hubs, took on heightened importance during the pandemic. These places served as effective sanctuaries where individuals could reaffirm their identities and experience recognition. Fraser's (1990) notion of "subaltern counterpublics" is relevant here, describing how marginalized groups form alternative spaces to articulate belonging and contest dominant narratives.

Thus, spatial and affective belonging is about physical presence, symbolic recognition, and emotional safety. The denial of access to space becomes a denial of inclusion itself. For migrant communities like the Austrian-Chinese, the pandemic underscored how spatial marginalization is both a symptom and a mechanism of racialized exclusion.

3.3.6. Conclusion

Belonging is a multifaceted and deeply situated process at the heart of migration and identity studies. It encompasses legal status or cultural participation, emotional attachment, symbolic recognition, and spatial inclusion (Antonsich, 2010). For migrants and racialized minorities, particularly those of Chinese descent in Austria, belonging is often shaped by a combination of individual agency and structural constraint, unfolding within broader regimes of national identity, public discourse, and institutional power (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

As demonstrated in this chapter, belonging is never neutral; it is constructed through power-laden processes that determine who is granted full societal membership and who remains on the margins (Anthias, 2013). These processes operate across multiple dimensions, cultural, spatial, transnational, and political, and are shaped by factors such as race, class, citizenship, and historical context. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the fragility of belonging for many diasporic Chinese communities, as Sinophobic narratives and spatial exclusion redefined them as outsiders, regardless of their level of integration or legal status (Gao, 2022; Reny & Barreto, 2022).

The theoretical lens of transnationalism complicates the idea of singular belonging by emphasizing that migrants often sustain multi-sited, material, emotional, and symbolic ties across national borders (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Vertovec, 2009). These attachments create what Glick Schiller (2004) calls "transnational ways of belonging," wherein individuals enact group membership in their societies of origin and settlement. However, as shown in previous sections, such layered affiliations can become sources of ambivalence or suspicion, especially when dominant national narratives demand exclusive loyalty or visible assimilation (Yuval-Davis, 2007).

Furthermore, belonging is not only enacted in the social or symbolic realm but is profoundly shaped by space. As Pfaff-Czarnecka (2012) argues, access to everyday spaces, such as schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods, is critical to developing a sense of inclusion and affirmation. When access to these spaces is disrupted by racialization or public suspicion, as occurred during the pandemic, it can rupture one's ontological security and produce a sense of alienation (Giddens, 1991; Röttger-Rössler, 2018).

Belonging is a constantly changing process, made and remade through shifting social relations and political conditions. It is not a state to be achieved once and for all, but a practice that migrants must continuously negotiate across borders, within communities, and in relation to dominant ideologies (Amit & Bar-Lev, 2014). The narratives of diasporic individuals reveal that belonging is simultaneously an emotional necessity and a political struggle.

In conclusion, understanding belonging in the context of the Chinese diaspora in Austria requires an intersectional, transnational, and historically grounded framework. Belonging must be seen not only as a personal experience but as a collective and contested process shaped by systems of recognition and exclusion. As Hall (1996) reminds us, identity, and by extension, belonging, is not a finished product but "a positioning," constantly negotiated within specific cultural and historical conjunctures (p. 226). Recognizing this complexity is essential for grasping the lived realities of migration and reimagining more inclusive forms of citizenship and community.

3.4. The rise of global Sinophobia

The global rise in Sinophobia, the fear, distrust, or hostility toward China and people of Chinese descent, has emerged as a defining phenomenon in the racial and geopolitical landscape of the 21st century. Although Sinophobia is rooted in centuries of Orientalist thought and colonial anxieties (Said, 1979; Zhang & Xu, 2020), its contemporary resurgence is shaped by the intersection of China's ascent as a global power, intensifying U.S.-China tensions, and, most significantly, the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Liu et al. (2019), Sinophobia comprises "negative discourses, emotions, and practices directed toward China and individuals of Chinese descent," often conflated with broader East Asian identities. This process blurs the lines between geopolitical rivalry and interpersonal racism, illustrating how racialization operates through both global narratives and local experiences (Nam et al., 2023; Mylonas & Wang, 2021).

Sinophobia is not only an issue of individual prejudice but is embedded in broader structures of racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983), Orientalism (Said, 1979), and exclusionary nationalism (Anderson, 1983). As Austria's migration history demonstrates, racialized others are frequently

scapegoated during moments of public uncertainty (Bauböck, 1996; Wodak et al., 2015). The stigmatization of Austrian-Chinese during the COVID-19 crisis exemplifies how local expressions of Sinophobia are entangled with global power dynamics and domestic patterns of xenophobia.

This chapter examines the multidimensional character of global Sinophobia, tracing its historical roots and pandemic-era intensification, as well as its articulation through media, politics, and everyday life. It also contextualizes the Austrian experience by drawing on national data (e.g., ZARA, 2021; IFES, 2022; Eurobarometer, 2022) to compare broader xenophobic tendencies with anti-Chinese sentiment. This provides a critical framework for understanding the lived realities of Austrian-Chinese communities, whose experiences of belonging are increasingly shaped by these intersecting discourses.

3.4.1. Historical and Geopolitical Roots

Sinophobia is not a recent phenomenon; rather, it is a “durable structure of feeling, discourse, and power” that continually adapts to shifting historical and geopolitical contexts (Wu, 2023, p. 334). Its ideological lineage reaches back to the 18th and 19th centuries, when, as Edward Said (1979) observed, “the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action. It is rather the other pole, the necessary pole of an inevitable opposition” (p. 93). This framework imagined China as a “despotic, stagnant civilization, fundamentally incompatible with Western modernity and progress” (Zhang & Xu, 2020, p. 107).

The construction of China as the “Other” served as a justification for colonial domination and a means of producing a Western identity. Said (1979) wrote, “Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying ‘us’ Europeans as against all ‘those’ non-Europeans” (p. 7). As Zhang (2008) emphasizes, “the European imagination persistently cast China as a land of unchanging traditions and authoritarian excess, always in need of civilizational uplift” (p. 203).

These discourses were not confined to the diplomatic sphere but “circulated widely through travel writing, art, popular literature, and the early press, shaping the very vocabulary with which Europeans thought about China” (Chow, 1998, p. 29). Chow further explains, “What I call ‘ethnic abstraction’ is a process by which real people and cultures are rendered symbolically interchangeable so that that difference can be at once feared and consumed” (Chow, 1998, p. 29).

The “Yellow Peril” trope, particularly salient in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, presented Chinese migration and influence as an existential threat. Wu (2023) notes, “the so-called ‘Yellow Peril’ panic fused economic anxieties with fears of racial contamination, justifying

exclusionary laws and social violence” (p. 336). This logic is part of what Robinson (1983) referred to as “racial capitalism,” which is defined as “the inseparable link between the development of capitalist economies and the hierarchical organization of populations by race” (p. 9).

In the 21st century, Sinophobia has “mutated, rather than disappeared, adapting to the anxieties of globalization and the rise of China as a technological and economic power” (Wu, 2023, p. 342). Horton (2020) reports that “Western media routinely frame debates over Huawei, TikTok, and China’s Belt and Road Initiative with suspicion, drawing upon older stereotypes of secrecy, authoritarianism, and threat” (p. 12).

Seneviratne and Muppidi (2021) argue, “the present moment is marked by a shift from simple competition to a discourse of moral demonization, in which China is cast as a pariah, dangerous not merely in economic or military terms but as a threat to the very fabric of global order” (p. 95). This strategy, they contend, “enables Western democracies to assert normative superiority while sidestepping their crises of legitimacy, such as rising internal authoritarianism and persistent racial inequality” (Seneviratne & Muppidi, 2021, p. 97).

Crucially, Sinophobia is not limited to the realm of high politics or elite discourse. Viladrich (2021) observes, “anti-China sentiment, whether expressed in policy or media, spills over into everyday experiences of profiling, exclusion, and at times physical violence” (p. 411). Chow (1998) writes, “The abstraction of Chinese and East Asian people enables their bodies to become proxies for diffuse anxieties, about disease, duplicity, or global competition” (p. 34).

Intersectionality intensifies these experiences. As Cheah et al. (2020) note in their study of Chinese Americans during COVID-19, “Experiences of Sinophobia have been linked to elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, especially among women and younger individuals” (p. e2020021816).

In the Austrian context, Sinophobia takes distinct forms shaped by local narratives. Wodak and Boukala (2015) point out, “The Austrian (and Central European) imaginary has long defined itself by exclusion, constructing the national ‘we’ in opposition to those marked as non-European or racially different” (p. 34). However, as Essed (1991) notes, “racial silence” persists: “In societies that pride themselves on tolerance, racism is often rendered invisible and thus goes uncontested” (p. 166).

Kwok (2013) observes, “Austrian-Chinese are economically present but rarely represented in mainstream journalism, politics, or public debate. A lack of recognition normalizes their marginalization” (p. 37). ZARA (2021) reports that, “symbolic exclusion and everyday

microaggressions, ranging from customer service refusals to school bullying, remain largely unacknowledged in Austrian discourse” (p. 15).

From colonial empire to modern moral panics, Sinophobia persists as a tool for consolidating Western identity and power. As Wu (2023) powerfully concludes, “The logic of Sinophobia is not simply repeated, but continually reinvented, resurfacing in new guises whenever the West seeks to reaffirm its boundaries” (p. 349). Understanding these continuities is crucial for analyzing how Chinese and East Asian individuals, including those in Austria, are situated within global hierarchies of race, nation, and belonging.

3.4.2. Sinophobia and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was not just a public health crisis; it was a global event that sharply intensified Sinophobic sentiment, laying bare the deep roots and adaptive strategies of anti-Chinese racism. From the initial outbreak in Wuhan, China, “the narrative quickly shifted to blaming the Chinese population for the spread of the virus, both in mainstream media and political discourse” (Gao, 2022, p. 450). Western political leaders and news outlets swiftly adopted labels such as “Wuhan virus” and “Chinese virus,” which, as Jeung et al. (2020) emphasize, “directly tied the virus’s origin to Chinese people and cemented associations between Chineseness and disease, contamination, and secrecy” (p. 4).

This racialization was neither novel nor accidental. As Ristić and Marinković (2022) point out, “public health crises have long served as pretexts for scapegoating and marginalizing minority groups, including Jews, Irish Catholics, and immigrant laborers during pandemics of cholera, plague, and smallpox” (p. 109). Echenberg (2002) similarly writes, “in moments of crisis, the public health narrative historically converges with racialized fears, leading to the stigmatization of marginalized communities as vectors of disease” (p. 18). COVID-19 mirrored this pattern, but the pace and scale of Sinophobic rhetoric, amplified by social media and globalized news, were unprecedented.

Gao (2022) notes that “the virus quickly became a racialized symbol of biological danger, often framed as a consequence of China’s ‘lack of transparency’ and political governance” (p. 450). Chou and Goto (2022) stress that “pandemic-era targeting of East and Southeast Asians illustrates the persistent tendency to conflate ethnic appearance with foreignness and threat” (p. 2).

The empirical impact was immediate and dramatic. Jeung et al. (2020) document that “anti-Asian hate incidents increased exponentially during the pandemic, reflecting a broader societal trend of racialization connected to geopolitical anxieties over China’s role in the outbreak” (p. 4). In their U.S.-based report, more than 6,600 hate incidents were recorded in

the first year alone, encompassing verbal harassment, physical assault, workplace discrimination, and avoidance.

Europe was not immune. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2021) found that “34% of respondents from East and Southeast Asian backgrounds reported experiencing discrimination in at least one domain of daily life during the pandemic, with many citing verbal abuse and social distancing as the primary forms of exclusion” (p. 15). In Austria, the Dokustelle für Muslime (2021) highlighted a “notable rise in racialized insults and avoidance behavior towards individuals perceived as East Asian, especially in public transportation and retail environments” (p. 5). Austrian media analysis revealed that “being stared at, avoided in supermarkets, or subjected to derogatory remarks became common experiences for Austrian-Chinese during the pandemic” (Medienwatch Austria, 2021, p. 13).

To make sense of these phenomena, Gao (2022) proposes the theory of “triple conflation,” which involves the merging of “racial (Chinese/East Asian), national (perceived allegiance to China), and political (association with the Chinese Communist Party) identities” (p. 452). According to Gao, “this conflation created a perfect storm for racialized attacks, where Chinese bodies were not only seen as carriers of the virus but as proxies for a geopolitical threat that needed to be contained” (Gao, 2022, p. 453).

This process was evident in the media. Medienwatch Austria (2021) found that “22% of articles referencing China in the context of the pandemic used language suggestive of blame, negligence, or secrecy,” with common headlines invoking terms such as “Chinese virus,” “danger from the East,” and “Wuhan lab theory” (p. 13). These tropes, as Seneviratne and Muppidi (2021) observe, “drew upon Orientalist fears of the ‘East’ as a locus of disease, secrecy, and authoritarianism” (p. 107).

The digital sphere was a crucial amplifier of Sinophobic sentiment. Tahmasbi et. al. (2020) document how “the COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by a surge in Sinophobic slurs and memes on Twitter, Facebook, and fringe platforms such as 4chan” (p. 1). These online discourses often blurred the line between conspiracy and mainstream rhetoric, as hashtags like #ChinaVirus and viral misinformation memes spread unchecked. Wu (2023) argues, “Digital platforms did not merely reflect Sinophobic tropes; they actively magnified and circulated them, resulting in real-world consequences for Chinese and East Asian communities” (p. 344).

In Austria, as elsewhere in Europe, the small size of the Chinese community and its relative invisibility have produced a unique vulnerability. FRA (2021) and Medienwatch Austria (2021) report that “Austrian-Chinese are seldom represented in public discourse, which made their struggles with discrimination less visible and less likely to be addressed” (FRA, 2021, p. 22).

Racialized avoidance was compounded by “symbolic exclusion”—declines in patronage for Chinese-owned businesses and avoidance of Chinese restaurants and shops (Gao, 2022, p. 455). As one respondent quoted in FRA (2021) put it, “People would change seats on the tram or step away in shops, as if I was contagious, even though I have lived here all my life” (p. 18).

This form of exclusion was both spatial and social. Gao (2022) describes how “the pandemic crystallized a form of symbolic exclusion, where Chinese people were avoided not only socially but also spatially, as restaurants and businesses associated with Chinese culture saw significant declines in patronage” (p. 455). ZARA (2021) confirms that “the closure and boycotting of Chinese restaurants and businesses had a devastating impact, not just economically but also psychologically, reinforcing a sense of otherness and insecurity” (p. 19).

The mental health toll of Sinophobia during the pandemic was profound. Cheah et al. (2020) found that “experiences of racism during COVID-19 were significantly associated with increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among Chinese American families, especially among women and children” (p. e2020039). Similar findings have been reported in European contexts. Tahmasbi et. al. (2020) explain, “The convergence of digital harassment, social exclusion, and mainstream Sinophobic rhetoric created a climate of fear and hypervigilance for many Asian communities” (p. 7).

Intersectional factors further shaped the impact. As Chou and Goto (2022) note, “the stigma was particularly acute for younger and female members of East Asian diasporas, who were often targets of both racialized and gendered harassment” (p. 2).

The pandemic revealed how quickly “the veil of inclusion can be stripped away from racialized minorities” (FRA, 2021, p. 20). Hall (1996) reminds us that “identities are not fixed; they are always in flux, defined in relation to power and cultural context” (p. 225). For many second-generation Austrian-Chinese, COVID-19 became a moment when their citizenship, linguistic fluency, and cultural integration provided little protection from being recast as “outsiders.”

In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic “acted as a catalyst for the intensification of Sinophobic sentiment worldwide. It not only revived historical racialized fears of disease and contamination but also embedded these fears in contemporary geopolitics, linking Chinese identity to the virus through a process of ‘triple conflation’” (Gao, 2022, p. 459). As Wu (2023) puts it, “the pandemic offered a pretext for the West to reaffirm old boundaries of difference, dressed in the language of public health and security” (p. 347).

In Austria, the combination of invisibility, institutional neglect, and the global circulation of Sinophobic tropes rendered the Chinese community especially vulnerable. This experience highlights, as Seneviratne and Muppidi (2021) conclude, “the urgent need to address the

intersection of race, national identity, and public health in understanding the contemporary politics of belonging” (p. 113).

3.4.3. The Role of Media and Orientalist Tropes

Media representations played a central and highly consequential role in shaping, amplifying, and globalizing Sinophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic, both internationally and within Austria. Mainstream news outlets in Anglo-European contexts, in particular, “frequently portrayed China through a lens of authoritarian opacity and cultural deviance, often framing its governance as inherently secretive and morally suspect” (Seneviratne & Muppidi, 2021, p. 84). This framing is rooted in what Said (1979) famously called “Orientalism”: a system in which “the Orient is constructed as everything the West is not, irrational, exotic, dangerous, and fundamentally ‘other’” (p. 2).

As Seneviratne and Muppidi (2021) argue, “China was framed as an inherently secretive and autocratic state, whose governance failures were not incidental but systemic, rooted in its political DNA” (p. 84). This Orientalist logic has a long lineage. Said (1979) notes, “For the West, the Orient has always been a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. Yet, it is also the place of danger and threat” (p. 1). Such dualism, Chow (1993) points out, results in “Chineseness often rendered intelligible in the West only through a grammar of containment, caught between allure and repulsion, modernity and archaism” (p. 25).

During the pandemic, these representational strategies intensified. Zhang and Xu (2020) demonstrate that “the narrative of oriental despotism has persisted in Western journalism, casting China as a static civilization incapable of transparency or democratic norms” (p. 143). Empirical evidence confirms the pattern: Newman et al. (2021) found in their content analysis that “nearly 38% of all stories referencing China and COVID-19 adopted negative or accusatory framings, particularly in Anglo-American outlets” (p. 7). Australian programs, such as 60 Minutes, and U.S. media, including Fox News and The New York Post, repeatedly foregrounded the “Wuhan lab leak” theory, often without scientific consensus, thereby reinforcing a causal link between Chinese geography and global catastrophe (Newman et al., 2021, p. 7).

These Orientalist framings were not confined to news articles but became viral in the digital ecosystem. “Social media platforms became echo chambers for orientalist stereotypes and Sinophobic tropes, as hashtags like #ChinaVirus and #WuhanFlu spread rapidly, morphing into memes and viral narratives that transcended borders” (Tahmasbi et. al., 2020, p. 3). The

Anti-Defamation League (2021) reported that “anti-Asian hate speech online increased by over 900% globally between February and April 2020,” a staggering acceleration.

Visual imagery played a critical role in constructing and circulating Sinophobic tropes. Scholars have noted that media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic often included images such as masked crowds, street surveillance, and exotic wet markets, representations that did not simply inform, but rather constructed the foreign as inherently diseased (Li, 2021; Breeze, 2022). These “cartographies of difference” contributed to a broader racialization and political framing of the pandemic, linking Chineseness with contagion in the public imagination (Li, 2021).

In Austria, both tabloid and mainstream media were observed to pair such imagery with pandemic headlines, reinforcing symbolic associations between Chinese identity and disease. For instance, metaphoric and alarmist frames, such as “virus invasion” or the “China virus”, were prevalent in early news coverage (Gritsch & Sedmak, 2023). These framings corresponded with spikes in negative sentiment on Austrian social media platforms, further amplifying public anxiety around perceived foreign threats (Gallé, Reuter, & Kaufhold, 2020).

Austria was not exempt from these dynamics. A 2021 report by Medienwatch Austria analyzing 1,200 COVID-related articles from major Austrian outlets revealed striking trends in Sinophobic framing:

Media Outlet	% of COVID-19 Articles with Sinophobic Language	Common Tropes Identified
Kronen Zeitung	42.5%	“Wuhan virus,” “danger from China,” wet markets
Die Presse	29.7%	“Chinese secrecy,” “lab leak theory,” “virus origin”
ORF News	23.6%	“pandemic mismanagement,” “Chinese state control”

(Sources: Medienwatch Austria, 2021; ZARA, 2021)

ZARA (2021) further documents that “Sinophobic incidents in Austria’s online spaces increased by 35% during the first pandemic year,” reflecting how quickly online narratives translated into real-world prejudice (ZARA, 2021, p. 17).

The psychological impact of this media environment was profound and widespread. Litam (2020) finds that “exposure to Sinophobic rhetoric correlated with higher levels of race-related stress, social avoidance, and trauma among Asian respondents” (p. 3). This aligns with Tuan’s (1998) concepts of “topophilia and topophobia,” in which “racialized bodies become either emotionally attached to or fearfully detached from particular spaces depending on how they are socially perceived” (Tuan, 1998, p. 149).

During the pandemic, public spaces in Austria and elsewhere became “charged with racial anxiety, pushing many East Asians into what Ahmed (2007) terms ‘affective economies of fear and unbelonging’” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 165). For many Austrian-Chinese, formerly neutral settings such as supermarkets or public transit “became sites of suspicion, avoidance, or outright hostility” (FRA, 2021, p. 18).

Crucially, these media constructions are not simply isolated expressions of bias. As Mylonas and Wang (2021) argue, “Sinophobia is not merely a reaction to a health crisis, it is the reproduction of a racialized world order in which China must remain the deviant Other” (p. 202). Media narratives thus function as what Hall (1997) calls “racial encoding,” transmitting “ideologies that frame racialized bodies in ways that justify exclusion, suspicion, and regulation” (Hall, 1997, p. 261).

This system is self-reinforcing: as Orientalist tropes circulate through media, they shape political debate, public policy, and everyday interactions, producing “a toxic discursive environment in which Chinese and East Asian individuals became both scapegoats and symbols” (Wu, 2023, p. 340). For Austrian media consumers, these narratives “normalize the idea of the foreign as dangerous, undermining social cohesion and exacerbating racial marginalization” (ZARA, 2021, p. 21).

Media coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic thus operated as a key vector for Sinophobia, reactivating Orientalist tropes and consolidating global and local racial hierarchies. The interplay of historical prejudice, contemporary geopolitical anxiety, sensationalist reporting, and viral digital culture generated new forms of exclusion, anxiety, and harm. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for challenging both the persistence of Sinophobia and the media structures that allow it to thrive.

3.4.4. Austrian Sinophobia in a Global Context

Situating Austrian Sinophobia within a broader global and historical framework reveals both its distinctive characteristics and its deep embeddedness in Austria’s long-standing logics of xenophobia and racialized nationalism. Building on earlier analyses of media discourse, transnational suspicion, and conditional belonging, this section argues that Sinophobia is not

an isolated phenomenon but a symptomatic expression of Austria's broader politics of exclusion, which has been adapted, intensified, and rendered visible by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Austria's contemporary xenophobia is rooted in its twentieth-century history and nation-building project. As Bauböck (1996) observes, "the post-imperial redefinition of Austria as a culturally and ethnically homogeneous nation was accompanied by new anxieties about internal and external 'others'" (p. 54). The idea of *kulturnationale Homogenität* (cultural-national homogeneity) creates a narrow, exclusionary framework for belonging, which systematically marginalizes those perceived as foreign, including, crucially, Austrian-Chinese.

This is not just a discursive effect but an institutional one: "xenophobia in Austria is routinely mobilized in political campaigns, policy debates, and media coverage, constructing a public sphere in which ethnic, religious, and cultural difference is problematized" (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 32). Migrant and minority groups, including Austrian-Chinese, are thus subject to both explicit and subtle forms of "symbolic exclusion: always present, yet never truly part of the nation" (Kwok, 2013, p. 41).

Globally, Sinophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic manifested as what Elias et al. (2021) term "geographically adaptive racism, forms of Sinophobia that refract through local histories, political economies, and state ideologies, but always situate Chinese identity as a site of risk or contagion" (p. 15). In India, the pandemic inflamed "border conflict, nationalist rhetoric, and social media hate speech, with over 40% of North-East Indians reporting pandemic-related racial discrimination" (Deka, 2021, p. 128). In Kyrgyzstan, "anti-Chinese protests erupted amid fears about labor migration, surveillance, and land acquisition" (Bas, 2020, p. 360). In Italy and France, the crisis prompted school bans, public activism, and viral social media resistance (#JeNeSuisPasUnVirus) against racialized scapegoating (Wang, 2020a; Wang, 2020b, Seneviratne & Muppidi, 2021).

Unlike the overt violence seen elsewhere, Sinophobia in Austria operates through subtle, institutionalized, and affective mechanisms. As Kwok (2013) puts it, "Chinese Austrians are economically present but culturally marginal, a duality that renders them particularly vulnerable in moments of national anxiety" (p. 37). Latham and Wu (2013) describe how "EU countries often construct Chinese migrants through a dual lens of secrecy and exoticism, producing hypervisibility as economic actors but invisibility as social or political subjects" (p. 112).

Public health emergencies have always intersected with questions of social inequality and racialization. In the case of COVID-19, Bambra et al. (2020) argue that the pandemic must be understood as a "syndemic", a crisis in which biological risk is deeply intertwined with preexisting social vulnerabilities such as poverty, structural racism, and precarious working

conditions. This perspective helps explain why BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities, including East and Southeast Asian populations in Europe, experienced not only higher rates of infection and economic insecurity but also increased scapegoating and stigma in public discourse.

Applying the syndemic framework to the Austrian context, it becomes clear that racialized minorities were exposed to a double burden: heightened health risks and intensified social exclusion. As Bambra et al. (2020, p. 964) emphasize, “COVID-19 is not the ‘great equalizer’ but rather a pandemic that amplifies existing inequalities and targets the most vulnerable.” In Austria, this meant that the Chinese diaspora was disproportionately affected by both direct and indirect consequences of the pandemic, not only as potential “carriers” of the virus in the public imagination, but also as targets of exclusionary policy and social suspicion.

This syndemic lens foregrounds the importance of considering health and social factors when analyzing how Chinese-Austrians navigated the crisis. It also connects the local experience to broader global patterns of racial capitalism and structural inequality.

Empirical data confirms this. FRA (2021) found that “30% of people of East or Southeast Asian descent in Austria reported experiencing discrimination during the first year of the pandemic, often in public spaces and customer service encounters” (p. 22). ZARA (2021) documented a “notable rise in Sinophobic speech and online abuse, with Chinese visibility surging in media narratives even as cultural recognition remained absent” (p. 19). These exclusions are often “subtle, cumulative microaggressions, being stared at, avoided, or subject to whispered comments, that erode everyday safety and belonging” (Sue et al., 2007b, p. 278).

Such subtlety is itself a form of violence. As Yuval-Davis (2006) writes, “symbolic exclusion disrupts not only public presence but also the psychological security of those who must continually navigate their (un)belonging” (p. 202). Ahmed (2007) theorizes this as “the affective politics of fear, where racialized subjects are framed as affectively ‘out of place’ even in spaces of long-term residence” (p. 162).

Sinophobia is not an outlier but a “symptom and reinforcer” of Austria’s broader xenophobic landscape. Its mechanism is familiar: Austrian-Chinese are accepted for their economic contributions but are culturally and symbolically “forever foreign” (Kwok, 2013, p. 37). The pandemic merely intensified what was already latent, revealing how quickly racialized suspicion can be activated when national anxieties rise.

Moreover, Sinophobia is often rendered invisible or “unproblematic” by institutions, reflecting what Essed (1991) calls “racial silence.” As she argues, “societies that see themselves as tolerant or post-racial often render the racism experienced by minorities invisible, denying the

existence of a problem” (p. 166). This silencing enables exclusion to persist beneath the surface, unchallenged and unaddressed by mainstream policy or public debate.

Intersectionality further complicates this landscape: Chinese women, youth, and other subgroups may encounter additional layers of marginalization, experiencing Sinophobia alongside gendered or generational prejudice.

These patterns have profound consequences for social cohesion and the sense of belonging. As Ahmed (2007) highlights, “The politics of fear constructs racialized bodies as affectively out of place, shaping not only how they are treated but how they come to feel about themselves and their right to belong” (p. 162). For Austrian-Chinese, the pandemic became a sharp reminder that integration is provisional and belonging is fragile, easily revoked in moments of crisis.

In sum, Sinophobia in Austria must be understood as an adaptive extension of the country’s enduring xenophobic tendencies, rooted in myths of cultural purity and continually reactivated in response to new perceived threats. The pandemic laid bare the “toxic combination of suspicion, silence, and subtlety” (Kwok, 2013, p. 42) at the heart of Austrian nationhood, a logic of conditional belonging that continues to shape the experiences of all racialized minorities, and Austrian-Chinese in particular.

Addressing Sinophobia, therefore, requires more than short-term crisis intervention. It demands a sustained critique of Austria’s historical narratives, institutional silences, and the everyday practices through which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are drawn and redrawn.

3.4.6. Conclusion

The rise of global Sinophobia is not merely a byproduct of pandemic-era panic or shifting geopolitical tensions; it is the latest articulation of a long-standing racialized discourse shaped by colonial histories, Orientalist imaginaries, and exclusionary nationalisms. As this chapter has demonstrated, Sinophobia manifests across multiple registers: as political rhetoric, media narrative, everyday discrimination, and structural marginalization. Whether through the scapegoating of Chinese bodies during COVID-19 or the moral vilification of China as a global actor, the dynamics of Sinophobia are transnational yet deeply contextual.

Across countries, from India to Italy, France to Kyrgyzstan, Sinophobia has adapted to local anxieties while drawing from shared global scripts of fear, disease, and disloyalty. In Austria, where the Chinese community remains small and often invisible in public discourse, Sinophobia emerged more subtly: through microaggressions, symbolic exclusion, and

discursive pathologization. As documented by ZARA (2021), FRA (2020), and Medienwatch Austria (2021), these manifestations significantly impacted the Austrian-Chinese sense of safety, identity, and belonging.

Theoretically, Sinophobia must be understood as both a continuation and a reconfiguration of older racial logics. It functions through the dual mechanisms of abstraction and affect, transforming geopolitical fears into interpersonal hostilities while denying racialized communities their place in the national imaginary (Chow, 1998; Ahmed, 2007). As such, Sinophobia is not an isolated phenomenon but a systemic force that links everyday racism with global hierarchies of power.

Crucially, Austria's case illustrates how racial exclusion does not always announce itself through violence or overt hate speech. Instead, it often takes the form of racial silence, institutional neglect, and cultural erasure. The dual position of Austrian-Chinese, as economically integrated yet culturally peripheral, renders them particularly vulnerable during crises. This condition is emblematic of a broader European tendency to frame racialized Others as permanent outsiders, whose belonging remains conditional and revocable.

The chapter's comparative lens also highlights the importance of contextual specificity in understanding how Sinophobia operates within and across national borders. However, despite local differences, the underlying structure remains: racialized geopolitics that turns Chinese presence, real or imagined, into a symbol of contagion, secrecy, or threat.

This sets the stage for the next chapter, which turns from discourse to lived experience. Drawing on interviews and ethnographic material, it will explore how Austrian-Chinese individuals navigate these exclusionary conditions, contest or internalize narratives of otherness, and rearticulate their sense of belonging in a world increasingly shaped by Sinophobic logics.

4.0. Findings

This chapter analyzes narrative interviews with six Austrian-Chinese individuals to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their experiences of identity, belonging, transnationalism, and Sinophobia. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter 3, these findings highlight how structural racism, exclusionary nationalism, and everyday microaggressions shaped diasporic lives across generational lines (Elias et al., 2021; Gao, 2022; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

The interviews reflect nuanced and evolving negotiations of identity, as participants describe fluid cultural affiliations, the affective weight of racialization, and pandemic-era shifts in public perception. Their narratives engage with multiple axes of differences such as language, appearance, class, and locality, each playing a role in how belonging is performed, questioned, or reclaimed.

The six participants in this study reflect a range of transnational and bicultural experiences within the Austrian context:

Jessica W., born in 1997 and raised in Vienna, grew up in a working-class household with limited exposure to Chinese cultural institutions or networks and did not participate in Austrian-Chinese peer groups.

Jenny H., born in 1995 and raised in Vienna, grew up in a Chinese household and became more interested in her heritage through her studies in sinology at university.

Lu Z., born in 1993 and raised in Graz, attended Catholic schools and formed connections with other migrants early on, rather than being part of a Chinese community.

Lukas G., born in 1996 in Vienna, only retrospectively recognized the subtle forms of exclusion he encountered throughout his childhood.

Eteri G., born in 1995 in Vorarlberg to a Taiwanese mother and a Georgian father, now residing in Vienna, navigates multiple cultural affiliations but identifies fully with none.

Thomas R., born in 1994 and raised in Vienna, has a mixed Chinese and Serbian heritage, which gives rise to a complex sense of belonging.

The author is solely responsible for all the following interview translations, which were rendered to the best of her knowledge and in good faith, adhering to the highest standards of scholarly rigor.

4.1. Migration Histories and Transnational Belonging

The migration histories of second-generation Austrian-Chinese individuals shape their sense of belonging through legal status, spatial context, and the affective, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of everyday life. While all participants were born in Austria, their narratives reflect different modalities of transnational attachment, cultural memory, and experiences of exclusion or detachment. These patterns align with Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) notion of simultaneity, which describes how migrants engage in more than one social field at a time, as well as Vertovec's (2001, 2009) framework of transnational social fields, which stresses the continuous negotiation of identity across intersecting social, political, and cultural spaces.

Jessica W.'s account exemplifies a form of cultural detachment despite structural integration. Raised in Vienna and embedded in Austrian institutions, she expressed a striking lack of symbolic affiliation with her Chinese background:

Jessica's linguistic experience at home highlights the hybrid realities many second-generation Austrian-Chinese navigate. Asked whether her family spoke mainly Chinese or a mixture at home, she reflects:

"With my siblings, mainly German, and my parents, Chinese. Honestly, neither my German nor my Chinese is at a high level because I often mix them. I would use both languages at the same time. I would use some Chinese words in a German sentence, and vice versa—that happened a lot. (IT20022024_JW, 00:06:44)¹

This passage reveals the fluid, sometimes fragmentary, nature of language use in migrant households. Rather than developing two distinct linguistic competences, Jessica describes a form of "translanguaging," where elements from both German and Chinese are blended within a single utterance. This code-switching reflects practical communication within the family and the "in-betweenness" of cultural identity (Wei, 2018).

Jessica's mixed-language environment is emblematic of broader patterns seen in second-generation families, where the desire to "fit in" locally combines with familial ties to heritage. As she notes, the result is often "not perfect" command of either language but the emergence of a personalized, hybrid mode of expression. Such practices highlight the challenges and

1 „Mit den Geschwistern, hauptsächlich Deutsch und mit den Eltern Chinesisch. Und ich muss ehrlich sagen, deswegen ist mein Deutsch und auch Chinesisch leider nicht auf einem hohen Niveau, weil ich dann oft gemixt hab. Also die Sprachen dann beide irgendwie gleichzeitig verwendet hab. In einem deutschen Satz hab ich dann paar chinesische Wörter verwendet und andersrum auch als es dann oft vorgekommen ist.“

creative adaptations involved in maintaining cultural heritage across generations, while illustrating the “ambivalent competence” that can become a defining feature of migrant childhoods (King & Lulle, 2016).

This linguistic hybridity, in turn, becomes part of the participants’ broader negotiation of belonging at home, school, and Austrian society.

Jessica’s narrative poignantly illustrates the complexities of cultural connection for those who grow up physically distant from their familial homeland. She shares:

"Unfortunately, when I was born, only my mother's father and mother were still alive, and I had never been to China. [...] but my grandmother came to Vienna, I think when I was 10 years old, and then stayed for 10 or 11 years [...] because I had not been to China myself, I still somehow felt very connected, especially when my grandmother was there, because she somehow brought Chinese culture and Chinese tradition into our family. I think that is why I have always felt so connected."(IT20022024_JW, 00:07:31)²

Jessica’s experience illustrates how transnational belonging can be mediated not only through physical travel but also through the presence of family members who serve as cultural carriers and transmitters. Despite never setting foot in China, she feels a strong emotional and symbolic connection to her heritage, anchored primarily by her grandmother’s influence.

This illustrates that cultural transmission can occur through “living memory” and daily practices, not only through direct experience of the homeland (Foner, 2009; Appadurai, 1996). The grandmother’s role was pivotal: by bringing Chinese traditions, stories, and rituals into the Viennese household, she enabled Jessica to form a personal bond with a place she had never visited. As Levitt (2009) argues, such “social remittances” - ideas, values, and practices carried by migrants - are crucial to sustaining a sense of transnational identity in the second generation.

Jessica’s anticipation of visiting China for the first time also highlights the ongoing, evolving nature of belonging, which is shaped by family history, anticipated futures, and the presence (or absence) of those who embody cultural memory. Her story highlights how, in the absence

² „Leider bei meiner Geburt war nur noch der Vater und die Mutter meiner Mutter eben noch am Leben und ich selber leider noch nie in China. [...] aber meine Großmutter ist, ich glaube als ich 10 Jahre alt war, ist sie nach Wien gekommen und ist dann für 10, 11 Jahre geblieben, [...] da ich selber nicht in China war habe ich trotzdem irgendwie viel mich sehr verbunden gefühlt, besonders als meine Großmutter da war, weil Sie irgendwie chinesische Kultur und chinesische Tradition in unserer Familie reingebracht hat, und ich glaube dadurch hab ich mich immer so verbunden gefühlt.“

of direct contact with the ancestral homeland, intergenerational relationships can serve as a powerful bridge, creating a sense of “home” within the diaspora.

Despite this symbolic distance, cultural practices such as cooking remained a quiet source of continuity:

“At home, we often cooked Chinese food. For me, that was like a piece of home, even though I had never been there.” (IT20022024_JW, 00:08:54)³

Jessica’s experience echoes Antonsich’s (2010) distinction between place-belongingness and the politics of belonging. Her limited contact with Chinese peers and a familial focus on economic survival inhibited deeper ethnic identification. As Anthias (2006) argues, belonging is not merely about shared ancestry or legal rights but requires emotional anchoring and symbolic affirmation.

Jenny H., also from Vienna, recalled her early efforts to downplay her Chinese background due to linguistic insecurity:

“I did not speak the language well, Chinese, I mean, and I often tried not to show that too much.” (IT06022024_JH_1, 00:13:00)⁴

She further explained:

“In school, I was scared someone would ask me to say something in Chinese.” (IT06022024_JH_1, 00:16:21)⁵

These moments vividly illustrate the resilience of racialized students in managing visibility in hostile environments. It echoes Yuval-Davis’s (2006) insight that belonging is shaped by recognition and vulnerability to nationalistic discourse. Jenny’s avoidance strategy, in line with Sedgwick and Yonge’s (2008) understanding of emotional survival in the face of social exclusion, is a testament to the strength of these students.

Jenny’s relationship to the broader Chinese community in Vienna was shaped by geography and her mother’s conscious choices regarding social networks and community involvement. She recalls:

³ „Zu Hause haben wir oft chinesisches gekocht. Für mich war das wie ein Stück Heimat – auch wenn ich nie dort war.“

⁴ „Ich konnte die Sprache nicht gut, also Chinesisch jetzt, und ich hab oft versucht, das nicht zu sehr zu zeigen.“

⁵ „Ich hatte immer Angst, dass mich jemand auffordert, etwas auf Chinesisch zu sagen.“

“As a child, I was in close contact with my cousins, and not just nephews, who also live in Vienna. However, over the years, that contact faded away. Those were the only Chinese people we knew, because my mother always insisted that we not get too involved in the Chinese communities in Vienna, as she wanted to avoid the gossip that is common in those communities. So, until high school, I did not have any other Chinese friends, also because I was the only Asian in my school in the 21st district.” (IT06022024_JH_1, 00:08:22)⁶

Jenny’s story illustrates how parental strategies and anxieties can shape the ethnic social worlds of the second generation. Her mother’s deliberate distancing from the local Chinese community, motivated by a desire to avoid gossip and maintain privacy, resulted in a relatively isolated upbringing, with limited exposure to co-ethnic networks outside the extended family. This aligns with research suggesting that immigrant parents sometimes adopt selective engagement with their ethnic community, balancing cultural preservation with concerns about reputation, privacy, or intergroup conflict (Zhou & Bankston, 1998; Louie, 2006).

Jenny’s isolation was compounded by the lack of other Asian students in her school environment, as she puts it with a hint of humor, “because in my school in the 21st district, I was the only Asian”, emphasizing her status as the lone representative of her background.

This quote thus highlights the intersection of individual family choices, neighborhood demographics, and the realities of urban diversity in shaping the contours of ethnic belonging for children of immigrants. For Jenny, the result was a childhood in which cultural identity was primarily lived within the nuclear family, further intensifying her later search for community and connection as a young adult.

Jenny’s narrative illustrates how the discovery of co-ethnic peers during adolescence can transform one’s experience of cultural difference into a source of validation and a sense of belonging. Reflecting on her first fundamental interactions with other Chinese students, apart from her family, she recalls:

⁶ „*Eigentlich war ich als Kind sehr viel mit meinen Cousinsen und Cousins und nicht nur Neffen, die auch in Wien leben, in Kontakt. Das hat sich dann irgendwie über die Jahre irgendwie ein bisschen reduziert auf fast gar keinen Kontakt mehr. Aber das waren tatsächlich, glaube ich, die einzigen Chinesen, zu denen wir damals noch Kontakt hatten, weil meine Mutter immer darauf bestanden hat, dass wir uns nicht zu sehr in den chinesischen Communities in Wien involvieren. Weil sie es irgendwie vermeiden wollte, dass es zu viel Gossip gibt, auch weil das ja doch sehr oft vorkommt in solchen Communities. Genau, deshalb hatte ich eigentlich bis zum Gymnasium keine anderen chinesischen Freunde oder Freundinnen, dadurch auch, dass in der Schule im 21. Bezirk keine anderen Asiaten außer ich in die Schule gegangen sind.*“

“I think the first emotion was joy. As a child, I always had unanswered questions, for example, about certain cultural traditions we practiced at home that nobody else knew. That was always unclear to me, why we were different from others, and only in the Gymnasium did I meet others who shared those things. I was happy to understand and feel understood by others as well, finally.” (IT06022024_JH_1, 00:12:34)⁷

She gives concrete examples of these “unanswered questions”:

“For example, religion comes to mind, we are Buddhists, and we always burned incense at home for certain festivals. Alternatively, when we made dumplings, we would always set some aside as an offering on the family altar. I found that so strange as a child because I did not understand why we did it. Over time, it became clearer, especially when I visited friends with Chinese backgrounds and saw they did similar things. Then I finally felt understood and represented.” (IT06022024_JH_1, 00:13:31)⁸

Jenny’s story encapsulates how cultural practices can feel isolating and confusing without a broader community that shares and explains their meaning. Only upon meeting peers with similar backgrounds did these practices shift from being “strange” and isolating to something affirming and communal, a transformation that echoes research on ethnic identity formation and “mirroring” in adolescence (Phinney, 1990; Zhou & Lee, 2017).

This sense of recognition, “felt finally understood and represented,” is not only emotional but also ontological, helping to answer longstanding questions of “why we are different.” It also shows how friendship networks can supplement, and sometimes even compensate for, the lack of broader community engagement during childhood.

⁷ „Ich denke schon, dass die erste Emotion Freude war. Auf jeden Fall. Weil es als Kind immer offene Fragen gab meinerseits, auf die ich irgendwie keine Antwort bekommen hab. Beispielsweise bestimmte kulturelle Traditionen, die wir zu Hause ausgeübt haben, sag ich jetzt mal, die andere aber gar nicht kennen. Das war mir als Kind immer sehr unklar, also weshalb das so ist, weshalb wir uns da ein bisschen unterscheiden von anderen und erst im Gymnasium habe ich andere Menschen quasi kennengelernt, die das dann auch geteilt haben. Und war natürlich dann ja sehr erfreut, das dann auch nachvollziehen zu können oder dass andere quasi mich auch dann nachvollziehen konnten.“

⁸ „Beispielsweise würden wir jetzt Religion einfallen, also wir sind Buddhisten und wir haben beispielsweise für bestimmte Feste immer Räucherstäbchen dann angezündet zu Hause. Oder wenn wir beispielsweise Teigtaschen gekocht haben, haben wir immer einige rausgefischt und sie dann quasi als Gabe dann auch vor die Statue, also vor diesen Altar gestellt zu Hause. Und als Kind war das für mich immer so absurd, weil ich nicht verstanden habe weshalb wir das gemacht haben. Und mit der Zeit ist es dann irgendwie klarer auch geworden und auch als ich dann eben bei den Freunden mit chinesischer Herkunft zu Hause war und die das dann auch irgendwie in die Richtung auch so gemacht haben, hab ich mich dann irgendwie voll verstanden gefühlt und auch irgendwie repräsentiert gefühlt.“

Jenny's journey thus reflects the broader dynamic for many second-generation migrants: only in the presence of others who share their background do private rituals and "hidden" family traditions become legible, valued, and sources of pride.

Jenny H. describes how her experiences in school and the world of classical music often exposed her to so-called "positive" stereotypes and microaggressions, comments that appear complimentary but are limiting and alienating. She reflects:

"For example, it is also a phenomenon in classical music, since there are so many Asian people who do it, that stereotypes are often voiced, like, 'Oh, then you probably started playing music or piano at age three, like all other Asians,' or things like, 'Ah yes, so you probably practice eight hours a day,' or, 'You must be good at math.' These comments are often wrapped as compliments, but it is unpleasant when you think about it." (IT06022024_JH_2, 00:23:00)⁹

These experiences are emblematic of what has been described in scholarship as "positive racism" or the "model minority" stereotype (Lee, 2009; Sue et al., 2007), where seemingly flattering assumptions still reduce individuals to narrow, racialized categories. As Jenny notes, these comments may be intended as praise but reinforce a sense of not fully belonging, instead highlighting one's difference.

When asked how this impacted her sense of belonging as a child, Jenny elaborates on the "in-betweenness" she felt in both Austria and China:

"Definitely, for sure. The thing is, I never really felt like I truly belonged anywhere. Of course, because of how I look, I stand out and people see me as a foreigner, in quotation marks. However, even when we flew to China and met our relatives, they always said, 'Oh, that is the one from abroad; she is European, not Chinese.' So, in both worlds, it was hard for me ever to feel like I truly belonged." (IT06022024_JH_2, 00:23:16)¹⁰

⁹ „Beispielsweise. Oder also das ist ja auch ein Phänomen in der klassischen Musik, da es so viele asiatische Personen gibt, die das Ausüben. (ahm) Dass dann Stereotypen oft auch ausgesprochen werden, wie beispielsweise ‚Oh, dann hast du bestimmt auch mit 3 Jahren schon begonnen, Musik zu machen oder Klavier zu spielen, wie alle anderen Asiaten auch‘ oder sowas mit ‚Au, Ja, dann übst du sicher auch 8 Stunden am Tag oder was auch immer‘ und ‚du bist sicher auch gut in Mathe‘. Also solche Kommentare kommen auch, die irgendwie als Kompliment oft verpackt sind, aber wenn man dann irgendwie darüber nachdenkt, dann ist es auch gar nicht so angenehm. Trotzdem ja.“

¹⁰ „Schon, auf jeden Fall. (ahm) Die Sache war ja auch die, dass ich mich eigentlich nirgends wirklich dazugehörig gefühlt hab. Hier natürlich aufgrund des Aussehens, da fall ich total auf und werde auch so wahrgenommen für sie. Also als fremde Person unter Anführungsstrichen.“

Jenny's reflection encapsulates what Bhabha (1994) calls the "third space" of hybridity, a position between cultures where identity is constantly negotiated, never fully affirmed by either side. The feeling of being "not Austrian enough" in Austria and "not Chinese enough" in China is a classic dynamic for many second-generation migrants, often described as "in-between" or "liminal" (Anthias, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Such stories reveal that "positive" stereotypes do not erase exclusion but instead reinforce a subtle and persistent sense of difference and the challenge of belonging, both at home and in public, as well as across borders.

University, however, brought a shift:

"Joining a pan-Asian student group made me think more about where I come from. I realized I had ignored a part of myself." (IT06022024_JH_1, 00:20:00)¹¹

She also reflected:

"I never really felt like the right Asian, because I was not Korean or into K-Pop. I was the wrong kind of Asian." (IT06022024_JH_2, 00:24:12)¹²

This reveals how pan-Asian identity is fraught with hierarchies and external expectations, reinforcing Bhabha's (1994) argument about the instability of hybrid identities.

Lu Z., raised in Graz, described a racially marked schooling experience that began in Catholic institutions his mother believed would be safer:

"I was the only foreign child [...] I stood out a lot." (IT02032024_LZ, 00:03:25)¹³

While Lu did not report overt bullying, his narrative reflects Ahmed's (2004) concept of stranger-making, where difference is constructed through cumulative cues of social distance.

Aber auch als wir dann nach China geflogen sind und dann unsere Verwandten getroffen haben, meinten sie auch immer so ‚Oh, das ist ja die, die aus dem Ausland kommt, ja, die ist eigentlich Europäerin und eigentlich keine Chinesin‘. Genau, also irgendwie war es in beiden Welten, sag ich jetzt mal, schwierig sich dazu-, also sich wirklich komplett dazugehörig zu fühlen.“

¹¹ „In der Uni, durch diese asiatische Studierendengruppe, habe ich begonnen, mich mehr mit meiner Herkunft zu beschäftigen. Ich habe gemerkt, dass ich einen Teil von mir lange ignoriert habe.“

¹² „Ich hab mich niemals als die Richtige Art von Asiatin gefühlt – weil ich nicht Koreanisch war oder K-Pop mochte. Ich war der falsche Typ Asiatin.“

¹³ „Ich war halt das einzige ausländische Kind [...] ich war sehr auffällig.“

His feelings of alienation were partly mitigated by the multicultural atmosphere of the Balkanese community in Graz:

“I was also friends with many people from former Yugoslavia. I often felt more comfortable with them.” (IT02032024_LZ, 00:06:15)¹⁴

This cross-ethnic solidarity aligns with Brubaker’s (2022) insight that belonging may be constructed relationally rather than ethnically, formed through shared experiences of marginalization.

Lukas G. described a subtler and more retrospective awareness of his difference:

“Only now I realize I felt different. Back then, I just did not question it.” (IT28092024_LG, 00:07:45)¹⁵

He added:

“Even when I was included, there was this sense I was not quite the same.” (IT28092024_LG, 00:09:10)¹⁶

These subtle distinctions mirror what Essed (1991) describes as “everyday racism”, a constant background hum of difference that rarely erupts into explicit hostility but is always felt.

In this thesis, particular attention has been paid to thoughtfully engaging with participants of mixed heritage, specifically individuals of Georgian and Serbian descent, notably Thomas and Eteri. Recognizing the importance of fully representing the complexity of their identities, the interviews and subsequent analyses consciously included reflections on all dimensions of their cultural backgrounds. Passages specifically addressing their mixed heritage highlight the multifaceted nature of their narratives, underscoring the intersectionality inherent in their lived experiences. This nuanced approach aligns with Austria's historical reality as a nation profoundly shaped by migrations from Eastern Europe and the Balkans, reflecting long-standing patterns of cultural and social integration, as well as tension (Graf, 2024; King & Gëdeshi, 2023).

Eteri G., raised in Vorarlberg by a Georgian father and Taiwanese mother, articulated a fragmented identification:

¹⁴ „Ich war auch mit vielen aus Ex-Jugoslawien befreundet. Bei denen hab ich mich oft wohler gefühlt.“

¹⁵ „Erst jetzt wird mir klar, dass ich mich anders gefühlt habe. Damals habe ich das nicht hinterfragt.“

¹⁶ „Selbst wenn ich integriert war, war da immer dieses Gefühl, nicht ganz dazuzugehören.“

“I cannot say what I am because I am only a little bit of everything.” (IT21022024_EG, 00:16:35)¹⁷

“I always had to explain myself, to Austrians, to Chinese, to Georgians. None of them thought I fully belonged.” (IT21022024_EG, 00:17:52)¹⁸

Her childhood memories include symbolic markers of Chinese culture:

“I vaguely remember having a traditional opera doll.” (IT21022024_EG, 00:01:30)¹⁹

This gradual erosion of symbolic cultural practices highlights the delicate nature of intergenerational cultural transmission and resonates with Appadurai’s (1996) notion of cultural disjuncture in migrant households. Eteri’s narrative further aligns with Bhabha’s (1994) concept of the “Third Space,” illustrating how hybrid identities resist simplistic categorization yet often remain socially and culturally unrecognized. As Lee (2020) notes, the psychological complexities of bicultural identities intensify when one’s belonging is consistently questioned from multiple cultural perspectives.

Similarly, Thomas R., who has a Chinese mother and Serbian father, described the challenges inherent in navigating multiple ethnic frameworks:

“I would call myself Austrian, but of a different origin... I work here, I studied here, but we had different customs and food at home.” (IT12062024_TR, 00:04:20)²⁰

Reflecting on childhood confusion, Thomas explained:

“I went to Chinese school on Saturdays and Serbian classes on Sundays, it was just too much for a small child.” (IT12062024_TR, 00:05:30)²¹

Ultimately, he concluded:

¹⁷ „Ich kann nicht sagen, was ich bin, weil ich von allem ein bisschen bin.“

¹⁸ „Ich musste mich immer erklären, bei den Österreichern, bei den Chinesen, bei den Georgiern. Niemand fand, dass ich wirklich dazugehöre.“

¹⁹ „Ich kann mich vage erinnern, so eine Oper-Figur als Puppe zu haben.“

²⁰ „Ich würde mich als Österreicher bezeichnen, aber mit anderem Hintergrund... Ich arbeite hier, ich habe hier studiert, aber zu Hause hatten wir andere Bräuche und Essen.“

²¹ „Ich war samstags in der chinesischen Schule und sonntags im serbischen Unterricht – das war einfach zu viel für ein kleines Kind.“

“Now I am proud of all sides, but it took time. I had to figure out how to mix them on my own.”
(IT12062024_TR, 00:12:42)²²

Thomas's reflections emphasize belonging as a dynamic, self-authored process shaped through ongoing personal reflection and negotiation.

Together, these stories demonstrate that migration history is not merely about physical movement but long-term positioning within multiple symbolic, emotional, and institutional landscapes. While all participants are legally and linguistically embedded in Austria, their sense of cultural “home” is conditional and shaped by recognition, repetition, and memory. As Chapter 3 emphasized, belonging is a socially and politically regulated process (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Amit & Bar-Lev, 2014), one that is made, unmade, and remade across encounters, spaces, and crises.

4.2. Identity Negotiation in Everyday Life

In Chapter 4.1, the participants' narratives reveal the complexity of migration histories and the evolving nature of belonging, influenced by legal status, cultural practices, and symbolic connections to the homeland. These histories shape participants' identities as they negotiate their place in Austria while maintaining ties to multiple social fields. Following these foundational insights on transnational belonging (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004), Chapter 4.2 delves deeper into everyday identity negotiations. This chapter highlights the micro-level struggles of participants as they manage visibility, deal with racial microaggressions, and navigate cultural expectations within the Austrian context. Here, we see how personal identity is shaped not only by structural forces but also through the day-to-day interactions and performative acts of belonging, discussed in Goffman's (1959) impression management and Ahmed's (2004) concept of “stranger-making”. Through these reflections, we observe how individuals constantly negotiate and adapt their sense of self to the shifting demands of their social environments.

Jenny H. recalled the affective labor of trying to assimilate during adolescence:

"I just wanted to fit in. I did not want people to hear me speak Mandarin with my mom."
(IT06022024_JH_1, 00:16:21)²³

²² „Heute bin ich stolz auf alle Seiten, aber das hat gedauert. Ich musste selbst herausfinden, wie ich das alles verbinden kann.“

²³ „Ich wollte einfach dazugehören. Ich wollte nicht, dass Leute hören, wie ich mit meiner Mutter Chinesisch spreche.“

Her account reveals how minority youth engage in what Goffman (1959) calls impression management, particularly under what Ahmed (2004) describes as "stranger-making" conditions. University marked a turning point:

"Through the Asian student group, I rediscovered my heritage." (IT06022024_JH_1, 00:20:00)²⁴

She further explained:

"People would ask me if I spoke Korean or liked BTS. And I was like: I am not even Korean." (IT06022024_JH_2, 00:24:00)²⁵

Jenny elaborated on this tension:

"Yeah, definitely. [...] Even when we flew to China and met our relatives, they would say things like, 'Oh, that is the one from abroad, she is European, not Chinese.'" (IT06022024_JH_2, 00:23:11)²⁶

She also discussed internalized stereotypes:

"I think it all turned into ambition [...] because there is this expectation toward Asians, and people are disappointed when you do not live up to it." (IT06022024_JH_2, 00:24:22)²⁷

She reflected on cultural exclusion and shifting perceptions:

"I think it works quite well now. I have realized it is not the most important thing in life [...] That striving to belong is not as high a priority anymore." (IT06022024_JH_2, 00:27:41)²⁸

Jenny also commented on the shifting public perception of Asianness:

²⁴ „Durch die asiatische Studierendengruppe habe ich meine Herkunft neu entdeckt.“

²⁵ „Ich wurde dann oft gefragt, ob ich Koreanisch kann oder BTS mag. Und ich dachte mir nur: Ich bin nicht mal Koreanerin.“

²⁶ „Schon, auf jeden Fall. [...] Aber auch als wir dann nach China geflogen sind und dann unsere Verwandten getroffen haben, meinten sie auch immer so ‚Oh, das ist ja die, die aus dem Ausland kommt, ja, die ist eigentlich Europäerin und eigentlich keine Chinesin‘.“

²⁷ „Ich glaube, das Ganze hat sich dann total in Ehrgeiz dann entwickelt [...] weil dadurch, dass diese Erwartung Asiaten gegenüber besteht, sind Leute dann auch dementsprechend enttäuscht, wenn man dem dann nicht gerecht wird.“

²⁸ „Ich finde, dass es mittlerweile ziemlich gut funktioniert. Weil mir einfach aufgefallen ist, dass es nicht das Wichtigste ist im Leben [...] Das Streben nach dem Zugehörigsein [...] ist nicht mehr so weit oben wie zuvor.“

"Nowadays it is almost cool to be Asian [...] People often ask me if I am from Korea because my makeup style resembles it." (IT06022024_JH_2, 00:29:56)²⁹

Eteri G.'s narrative illustrates the profound ambivalence and exhaustion of identity management that many second-generation migrants experience within a racialized society. Her observation:

"I am Chinese enough to get racist comments, but not enough to be allowed to be upset about them" (IT21022024_EG, 00:12:30)³⁰

Vividly captures the dilemma of conditional belonging. This experience echoes Yuval-Davis's (2006) argument that the "politics of belonging" are fundamentally shaped by the power to include or exclude, and by the conditions under which one's identity claims are recognized as legitimate or dismissed as inauthentic.

Eteri's heightened anxiety in public spaces and her refusal to acquiesce to stigma:

"I was more anxious when I went outside [...] but at some point I refused just to give in" (IT21022024_EG, 00:13:20)³¹

She exemplifies the emotional labor of minority navigation (Ahmed, 2004; Anthias, 2006). Her struggle to assert herself in the face of microaggressions aligns with Hall's (1996, 1997) theory of identity as a discursive process: Identity is not a stable essence but an ongoing negotiation shaped by context, representation, and power.

This sense of being perpetually out of place:

"You are still a foreigner in a place that's supposed to be home" (IT21022024_EG_2, 00:25:45)³²

This demonstrates what Bhabha (1994) calls the migrant's "unhomely" condition: a sense of estrangement from both the host society and the imagined homeland. Eteri's investment in Sinology and the search for "authentic perspectives":

²⁹ „Mittlerweile ist es ja fast cool, Asiate zu sein [...] Ich werd oft gefragt, ob ich aus Korea bin, weil mein Make-Up-Stil so aussieht.“

³⁰ "Ich bin Chinese genug, um rassistische Kommentare abzubekommen, aber ich bin es nicht genug, um mich darüber aufregen zu dürfen"

³¹ "Ich war schon, wenn ich rausgegangen bin, dann mehr gestresst. [...] Ich hab dann teilweise auch so aufgeregt, dass ich mich irgendwie geweigert habe, dann einfach klein beizugeben"

³² "Man ist immer noch Ausländer an einem Ort, der eigentlich Heimat sein sollte"

"I started actively looking for Chinese authors [...] I wanted authentic perspectives." (IT21022024_EG_2, 00:31:54)³³

Reflects a form of cultural resistance and agency, a desire to reclaim narrative authority over her hybrid identity (Hall, 1996).

Eteri's turn toward cultural and academic engagement with her Chinese roots:

"I study Sinology because I realized it made me feel more at ease. [...] I wanted to know more about my roots, because I never really got to live them." (IT21022024_EG_2, 00:16:27)³⁴

Highlights the symbolic and affective strategies migrants use to manage the contradictions of in-betweenness (Anthias, 2006).

Eteri's story, therefore, powerfully embodies the theoretical concepts of boundary-making, emotional labor, and identity hybridity. Her narrative demonstrates that the struggle for recognition is not only about inclusion, but also about reclaiming the right to define and express complex, intersecting identities in a social context that too often polices the boundaries of "authentic" belonging.

Lu Z., born in 1993 and raised in Graz, exemplifies how the experience of racialization in Austrian schools shapes self-perception and the negotiation of cultural identity for second-generation migrants. In middle school, he was the only student of Chinese descent, and direct racist insults were a part of daily life:

"Haha, a Chinese, slant-eye, dog-eater and so on." (IT02032024_LZ, 00:02:49)³⁵

These insults, rooted in persistent Orientalist stereotypes (Said, 1979; Hall, 1997), demonstrate the ease with which school environments can reproduce exclusionary national imaginaries. Lu's response was not passive. Instead, he asserted agency through self-defense, refusing to internalize a victim identity:

"I never let myself be bullied, I fought back." (T02032024_LZ, 00:04:15)³⁶

³³ *"Ich hab dann wirklich aktiv chinesische Autor*innen gesucht [...] Ich wollte authentische Perspektiven."*

³⁴ *"Ich studiere Sinologie, weil ich gemerkt habe, dass ich mich dadurch wohler gefühlt hab. [...] Ich wollte mehr über meine Wurzeln wissen, weil ich sie nicht wirklich leben konnte"*

³⁵ *„Ha-ha-ha, ein Chinese, Schlitzauge, Hunde essen und so.“*

³⁶ *„Ich habe mich nie mobben lassen, ich habe mich gewehrt.“*

This strategy reflects what Fanon (1952) describes as a refusal to accept imposed inferiority, highlighting the embodied dimensions of resistance for racialized youth. However, for Lu, the negotiation of identity extended beyond confrontation. Although he did not have strong connections to a local Chinese peer group, his family remained a core site of cultural transmission and maintenance:

"I can do conversational Chinese, because what I know I learned from my parents in daily life." (IT02032024_LZ, 00:10:45)³⁷

Such everyday bilingualism, often sustained in the private sphere despite public exclusion, supports theories of "rooted transnationalism" (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004) and demonstrates how family practices preserve cultural capital even in settings where public recognition is lacking.

In adulthood, Lu's relationship to China transformed. An early trip focused on entertainment gave way to a more profound curiosity about heritage and history:

"In 2019, I was there with my three guy friends and all we thought about was partying. [...] Now I want to go alone, explore the country and the culture." (IT02032024_LZ, 00:39:00)³⁸

This shift from social distance to intentional cultural engagement echoes Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, where identity is constructed "in-between" cultural spaces and constantly renegotiated through new encounters. Lu now seeks to reclaim aspects of his heritage actively:

"So lately I have been diving into it, watching documentaries [...] I want to catch up a bit." (IT02032024_LZ, 00:39:57)³⁹

Lu's evolving journey, from resisting discrimination to retaining his home language to proactively exploring Chinese culture, illustrates the nonlinear, affective, and agentic pathways of belonging described by scholars such as Antonsich (2010) and Yuval-Davis (2006). His story shows how everyday racism, rather than producing only trauma or marginalization, can also motivate resilience, reflexivity, and new forms of transnational connection.

³⁷ „Ich kann Alltagschinesisch, weil das chinesische, was ich kann, habe ich von meinen Eltern gelernt im Alltag.“

³⁸ „2019 war ich mit meinen 3 Jungs dort und was wir hatten, nur feiern im Kopf. [...] Jetzt möchte ich allein dorthin reisen und mir das Land ein wenig anschauen, die Kultur.“

³⁹ „Deswegen in letzter Zeit befasste ich mich sehr viel damit, schau mir viele Dokus an [...] Ich will das bisschen nachholen.“

Much like Eteri and Jenny, Lu reflects on delayed cultural awakening shaped by the absence of early familial discourse:

"Kids do not come to it on their own. You need impulses from your parents." (IT02032024_LZ, 00:41:05)⁴⁰

His story exemplifies a generational shift toward cultural curiosity, driven by emotional maturity and a growing self-awareness.

Lukas G.'s school years exemplify the subtle yet persistent forms of everyday racism (Essed, 1991) that shape minority experiences in Austria. As the only Chinese student in his cohort:

"In school, I never met anyone from my country." (IT28092024_LG_1, 00:02:19)⁴¹

His visible difference marked Lukas, setting the stage for both overt and covert forms of exclusion. Racialized jokes and casual mockery, often masked as humor, were a recurring feature of his school environment:

"There were racist jokes about Asians, but I always ignored them [...] A joke now and then, you can take with humor." (IT28092024_LG_1, 00:03:13).⁴²

As Essed (1991) argues, such microaggressions become normalized strategies of exclusion, compelling minorities to either assimilate or minimize their discomfort to maintain group cohesion.

Lukas turned inward, lacking a peer community that reflected his heritage, and found a sense of belonging in family traditions and cultural rituals. This process echoes Yuval-Davis's (2006) notion of the "politics of belonging," where inclusion is continually negotiated at the boundaries of the majority's norms. While celebrations like the Chinese New Year provided temporary affirmation:

"Of course we celebrated it" (IT28092024_LG_1, 00:08:10)⁴³ The erosion of transnational ties was evident in his diminishing contact with extended family in China:

⁴⁰ „Von selbst kommen wir als Kinder nicht drauf. Dazu bräuchte es Denkanstöße von den Eltern.“

⁴¹ „Also die Schulzeit war so, dass ich wirklich noch nie einen getroffen habe, der von meinem Land kommt.“

⁴² „Natürlich gab es halt dann so rassistische Witze über Asiaten, aber ich hab's immer ignoriert [...] Ab und zu mal so einen Witz bringen, kann man auch mit Humor nehmen“

⁴³ „Natürlich haben wir das gefeiert“

“I have little contact with my grandparents” (IT28092024_LG_1, 00:11:23)⁴⁴.

Lukas’s story also illustrates the complex dynamics of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), as he navigated conflicting expectations from his family and Austrian society. While his parents emphasized academic achievement, in line with traditional migrant aspirations:

“My parents wanted me to go to university. I, of course, did the opposite.” (IT28092024_LG_1, 00:15:52)⁴⁵

Lukas’s path reflected both resistance and adaptation. His reflections on cultural difference:

“The Chinese are much more disciplined, much more respectful.” (IT28092024_LG_1, 00:14:14)⁴⁶

This suggests a dual consciousness, wherein he values and distances himself from rigid cultural hierarchies.

His gradual loss of language skills:

“My brother speaks worse Chinese than I, but I have a lot to improve as well, according to my parents,” (IT28092024_LG_1, 00:22:43)⁴⁷ Regarding to his visit to the Chinese language school:

“I did not learn much,” (IT28092024_LG_1, 00:24:06)⁴⁸, highlights a common challenge faced by second-generation migrants: maintaining cultural and linguistic ties amidst pressures to assimilate. Ultimately, Lukas’s narrative demonstrates how the emotional and symbolic dimensions of belonging are shaped by structural conditions and daily negotiations of identity and exclusion (Anthias, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

By situating Lukas’s experience within these theoretical frameworks, it becomes clear that his story is not merely an individual account but a reflection of the broader processes of racialization, boundary-making, and hybrid identity negotiation that define the Austrian-Chinese experience.

⁴⁴ *“Ich habe wenig Kontakt zu meiner Oma und Opis”*

⁴⁵ *“Meine Eltern wollten, dass ich unbedingt studiere. Ja, ich habe natürlich das Gegenteil gemacht”*

⁴⁶ *“Die Chinesen sind viel disziplinierter, viel respektvoller.”*

⁴⁷ *“Mein Bruder kann laut meinen Eltern schlechter Chinesisch als ich, aber ich könnte mich auch noch verbessern.”*

⁴⁸ *“Viel gelernt habe ich aber nicht”*

4.3. The Impact of the Pandemic on Perceptions of Belonging

The narratives presented in Chapter 4.2 illustrate the personal, emotional labor involved in identity negotiation within everyday contexts. Participants, like Jenny H., describe their efforts to assimilate and manage visibility in the face of societal expectations, using Goffman's (1959) framework of impression management and Sedgwick & Yonge's (2008) emotional survival theory. The tension between internalized cultural norms and external societal pressures reveals how individuals continuously reshape their identities to belong. Moving into Chapter 4.3, we turn our attention to how the pandemic exacerbated these identity struggles by intensifying the racialization of Chinese identities in Austria. The pandemic's role in re-shaping perceptions of belonging is central here, as participants like Jenny H. and Jessica W. report a shift in public gaze, where their once "invisible" identities were suddenly highlighted and stigmatized. Drawing on Hall's (1990) theory of identity as positional and Bhabha's (1994) third space, this chapter explores how external racialized narratives during the pandemic further complicated personal and collective senses of belonging. The pandemic served as a powerful lens through which public discourse interrogated, amplified, and often marginalized these identities.

Jenny's experience during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates how transnational family ties and the movement of information and practices across borders can shape both protective behaviors and new vulnerabilities for minority groups in Austria. Her account highlights how racialization intensified in public life, echoing scholarly observations on the "racialization of disease" and everyday stigma (Bieber, 2020b; Essed, 1991).

She recalls:

"Absolutely. For example, my mother is close to her sister, who lives in China. By the end of 2019 or early 2020, they had already told us about the first cases discovered in China. They told us how tense everything was, how everyone was scared, and how everything felt uncertain. So we heard about it before the European media reported on it. (...) Because we were in China in summer 2019 and I was sick for a while, I bought masks there and brought them back to Vienna, but with no intention of ever actually using them here. [...] We were some of the first people in Vienna to use masks, simply because we had them at home. That was the first time I realized that people here did not understand this or could not relate to it. That

is when I started hearing comments, for example, on public transport or the street” (IT06022024_JH_1, 00:19:00)⁴⁹

A particularly telling moment underscores how everyday behaviors became racialized microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007):

“For example, one time I was wearing a mask and walked past, let us say, a young man, and he commented, ‘Oh, YOU of all people are wearing a mask.’ Of course, that is vaguely phrased but very sarcastic. Moreover, I knew exactly what he meant. I was shocked that people could say something like that, and I could not respond.” (IT06022024_JH_1, 00:19:47)⁵⁰

For Jenny H., the pandemic catalyzed a profound reevaluation of her place in Austrian society. What began as transnational awareness, her family’s early knowledge of the virus from relatives in China, became a source of new vulnerability when local Austrian contexts failed to recognize the legitimacy of these early precautions. Her decision to wear a mask before it became common practice was met with suspicion and racialized hostility. A sarcastic comment from a passerby, “Oh, you of all people are wearing a mask”, illustrates how an everyday act of health-conscious behavior was reinterpreted through racialized lenses. Jenny’s narrative highlights Goffman’s (1963) theory of “spoiled identity,” where visible markers of difference become stigmatized under shifting public discourses. This stigmatization was not merely verbal but affective: Jenny describes being shocked and rendered speechless, a reaction that speaks to the emotional toll of racialized scrutiny and aligns with Ahmed’s (2007) argument that affect “sticks” to certain bodies in moments of crisis.

Similarly, Jessica W. experienced a rupture in her sense of belonging, marked by a shift from invisibility to negative attention. She described feeling “more Asian” not because of a personal change, but because of how others suddenly looked at her. This external redefinition of identity, mediated through blame and suspicion, resonates strongly with Hall’s (1997) view that identity

⁴⁹ „Absolut. Also meine Mutter ist beispielsweise in sehr engen Kontakt mit ihrer Schwester, die in China lebt. Und die haben uns schon gegen Ende 2019, also quasi Anfang 2020 genau da hat haben sie uns schon erzählt von den ersten Fällen, die in China quasi aufgedeckt wurden. Und uns auch von der Situation erzählt, dass alles irgendwie gerade so angespannt ist und irgendwie alle sich auch ein bisschen fürchten und alles so unsicher ist. Also, das haben wir. Jeden Fall schon vor der Berichterstattung hier in Europa mitbekommen.“

⁵⁰ „Beispielsweise als ich mal die Maske anhatte und an einem. Ich sag jetzt mal einen jungen Mann vorbeigegangen bin, (ahm) kam dann der Kommentar ‚Oh, gerade DU trägst eine Maske‘. Und ich meine, das ist natürlich sehr vage formuliert, aber sehr sarkastisch. Und ich wusste auch ziemlich genau, was er damit meint. Aber zu dem Zeitpunkt war ich auch, glaube ich, ein bisschen schockiert, dass Leute so was sagen könnten und. Hab dann auch gar nicht reagieren können.“

is not a fixed essence but is produced within regimes of representation. The transformation Jessica underwent, moving from a background presence to a symbolically charged subject, reveals the fragility of conditional inclusion. As she began to feel guilt and embarrassment over her heritage, she turned inward, seeking to reclaim some sense of agency through reading and reconnecting with Chinese history. This reflexive turn mirrors Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space, where hybrid identities are not just imposed but actively contested and renegotiated in moments of crisis.

"I suddenly felt Asian, not because of me, but because of how people looked at me." (IT20022024_JW, 00:19:22)⁵¹

"People just looked at me differently, as if I was doing something wrong. As if I was responsible for the virus being here." (IT20022024_JW, 00:30:25)⁵²

"I started reading more about China and learning about our history." (IT20022024_JW, 00:36:00)⁵³

Whereas Jenny and Jessica internalized and reprocessed these identity shocks, Lu Z. presented a more ironic and emotionally distanced response. His recounting of being denied entry to clubs in Korea because he was perceived as Chinese, despite being Austrian, was delivered with humor. "We made fun of it," he said, reflecting a coping strategy grounded in deflection and affective detachment. This response can be understood through affect theory as a defensive maneuver, one that shields the self from deeper psychological harm by reframing exclusion as absurd. However, the impact of the pandemic was not trivial for Lu. The lockdown coincided with the end of a five-year relationship, and he described being "heartbroken" and isolated, unable to distract himself. This juxtaposition of public emotional detachment and private emotional collapse illustrates the intersection of racialized vulnerability with personal trauma, creating layered forms of affective strain.

⁵¹ „Da hab ich mich plötzlich asiatisch gefühlt, nicht wegen mir, sondern wegen der Blicke der anderen.“

⁵² „Die Leute haben mich einfach anders angeschaut, als ob ich was falsch mache. Als ob ich schuld bin, dass der Virus hier ist.“

⁵³ „Ich habe angefangen, mehr über China zu lesen und mehr über unsere Geschichte zu erfahren.“

"We were often not let into clubs because we were Chinese... even though we said we were from Austria." (IT02032024_LZ, 00:28:16)⁵⁴

"It did not affect me... We made fun of the fact that this was happening to us in an Asian country." (IT02032024_LZ, 00:28:34)⁵⁵

"Corona ended my five-year relationship... I was freshly heartbroken during lockdown, alone, and could not distract myself." (IT02032024_LZ, 00:31:04)⁵⁶

Lukas G., meanwhile, located pandemic-era racism within a continuum of longstanding discrimination. "Racism was just something new that was added," he said, signaling that exclusion had always been a feature of his social experience, not a novel disruption. Essed's (1991) concept of "everyday racism" aptly captures this dynamic, the normalization of low-level, persistent microaggressions that accumulate over time. For Lukas, the pandemic was not a rupture but an amplification. Although workplace environments offered some reprieve from school-based bullying, his sense of belonging remained fragile and performative. Notably, he remarked that people could tell he had "more of an Austrian way," suggesting that his perceived level of integration was contingent on his ability to perform cultural proximity. This performance underscores Bhabha's (1994) insight into mimicry as a strategy of the colonized subject: one that is "almost the same, but not quite." Lukas's identity thus became a site of continuous negotiation, visible, scrutinized, and assessed for its adherence to normative codes of belonging.

"Bullying was a big thing. Racism [...] it was something new that was added, but not something entirely new." (IT28092024_LG, 00:29:10)⁵⁷

"I think people can tell I have more of an Austrian way about me." (IT28092024_LG, 00:43:45)⁵⁸

⁵⁴ „Wir sind öfter in Clubs nicht hineingekommen, weil wir Chinesen sind... obwohl wir gesagt haben, dass wir aus Österreich kommen.“

⁵⁵ „Hat mich nicht getroffen... Wir haben uns darüber lustig gemacht, dass uns das in einem asiatischen Land passiert.“

⁵⁶ „Corona hat meine fünfjährige Beziehung zerstört... Ich war im Lockdown frisch getrennt, alleine und konnte mich nicht ablenken.“

⁵⁷ „Mobbing war eine große Sache. Rassismus [...] es war jetzt halt wieder was Neues, also halt was dazu kommt, aber halt jetzt auch nicht wirklich was neues Neues.“

⁵⁸ „Ich glaube, man erkennt an mir, dass ich mehr so eine österreichische Art habe.“

Thomas R. offered yet another variation on this theme: an atmosphere of “subtle tension” rather than confrontation. Although he did not experience explicit Sinophobic abuse, he noted a change in how people interacted with him, being polite on the surface but laced with unease. Jokes like “you brought corona” were delivered with a smile but were nevertheless imbued with suspicion. His account reveals what Ahmed (2004) calls the “nonverbal economies of fear,” where emotions circulate beneath language and social cues, shaping interactions in ways that are deeply felt but not consistently verbally articulated. In such moments, belonging is not denied outright, but destabilized through an ambient sense of being “out of place.”

"I never really had problems, but the atmosphere was different. When I spoke with people, I often noticed this subtle tension. It was just a weird feeling." (IT12062024_Thomas, 00:11:15)⁵⁹

"I know people made jokes like 'you brought corona,' but to me it was never meant seriously. There was a weird silence, like people were polite, but I could tell they were tense." (IT12062024_Thomas, 00:12:12)⁶⁰

Together, these narratives reveal how the pandemic acted as a trigger for both overt and subtle forms of racialization, destabilizing identity positions that had previously felt secure, or at least navigable. For some, the crisis prompted introspective reconnections to heritage; for others, it surfaced existing wounds or introduced new layers of emotional precarity. What unites these experiences is not uniformity, but a shared sense of being seen differently, of being made foreign by a public discourse that positioned Chinese identity as both epidemiological risk and political symbol.

These findings affirm Hall's (1990) claim that identity is always formed within representation and about power. They also reinforce Yuval-Davis's (2006) insight that belonging is not merely about inclusion but about the terms and conditions under which recognition is granted or withheld. The pandemic did not invent Sinophobia in Austria. However, it revealed how precariously situated East Asian identities are within national narratives, visible only when they become the target of blame, and often invisible when it comes to recognition or solidarity. As such, the pandemic did not simply alter perceptions of belonging; it exposed their conditional nature and the affective labor required to sustain them.

⁵⁹ *"Ich hatte eigentlich nie Probleme, aber die Atmosphäre war anders. Wenn ich mit Leuten sprach, bemerkte ich oft diese subtile Spannung. Es war einfach ein seltsames Gefühl."*

⁶⁰ *"Ich weiß, dass die Leute Witze machten wie ‚Du hast Corona mitgebracht‘, aber für mich war das nie ernst gemeint. Es herrschte eine seltsame Stille, die Leute waren zwar höflich, aber ich konnte sehen, dass sie angespannt waren."*

4.4. Media Discourses, Sinophobia, and National Identity Construction

Having explored the personal impact of the pandemic on participants' senses of belonging and racialization in Chapter 4.3, we now shift to the larger societal narratives in Chapter 4.4, which are crucial for understanding how media representations reinforced racialized perceptions and constructed national identities during the pandemic. The interviews demonstrate how Sinophobic media portrayals of China as the source of the virus shaped societal attitudes and influenced how participants were viewed in Austria. Lukas G., Jenny H., and others reflect on how media discourse, even without direct media consumption, shaped interpersonal dynamics and social exclusion, in line with Seneviratne & Muppidi's (2021) discussions on the media's role in reinforcing racialized perceptions. The shifting national identity during the pandemic is explored through Sinophobic media portrayals, which influenced collective memory and affected how participants navigated their own identities within the nation. This chapter also discusses the importance of media literacy in shaping identity, as participants increasingly turned to alternative media sources (like Chinese media) to counterbalance the racialized narratives presented by Austrian outlets. The role of media in constructing national identity thus emerges as a significant factor in understanding the ongoing negotiations of belonging and cultural self-perception during the crisis.

For Lukas G., the media's influence was felt not directly through consumption but through social interaction. Although he was not an active news reader, he noticed how media tropes filtered into peer behavior: "They did not say it to my face, but I could feel the shift in tone, suddenly jokes about bats or eating weird things became common." (IT28092024_G., 00:30:00)⁶¹

This indirect exposure illustrates how dominant narratives disseminate through social reproduction, reinforcing Essed's (1991) concept of everyday racism as subtle, normalized, and often unspoken. As Seneviratne and Muppidi (2021) argue, crisis reporting not only informs but shapes public perception, projecting national fears onto visible minority bodies. In Lukas's case, humor became a vehicle for racialized distancing, demonstrating the pervasiveness of Sinophobic tropes in shaping interpersonal dynamics.

During the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, Jenny H. experienced firsthand how media-fueled narratives of blame could shape public attitudes and undermine her sense of safety. Reflecting on this time, she recalled:

⁶¹ „Die haben es mir nicht direkt gesagt, aber ich hab den Tonwechsel gemerkt, plötzlich wurden Witze über Fledermäuse oder das Essen von seltsamen Sachen häufiger.“

“I felt that many people shared those thoughts [...] China was simply the scapegoat [...] and people who only consume that kind of media and do not know any Chinese people form their opinions entirely from what they get in the media.” (IT06022024_JH_2, 00:34:49)⁶²

Jenny’s analysis directly echoes what scholars such as Reny and Barreto (2022) and Zhang and Xu (2020) describe as media-amplified Sinophobia, where the racialization of public health crises fosters widespread public suspicion and moral panic. Her description of the media as a homogenizing force, especially for individuals without direct contact with Chinese people, aligns with Hall’s (1997) concept of the media as a key “site of ideological reproduction.”

Her reaction to this hostile media environment was not only intellectual; she began studying sinology to challenge such one-sided narratives, but also deeply emotional and embodied:

“That is one of the main reasons I started studying sinology [...] in the Austrian school system, especially in history, you learn almost nothing about Asia.” (IT06022024_JH_2:00:35:49)⁶³

As Jenny rightly suggests, this educational gap facilitates the circulation of stereotypes, making alternative narratives less accessible, a phenomenon that Appadurai (1996) would describe as a disjuncture in knowledge flows between “here” and “there.”

When asked whether she felt safe in Vienna at the time, she responded:

“At first, honestly, not anymore [...] there were so many reports from America about attacks on Chinese people [...] even though nothing had happened yet in Austria, I still developed fear.” (IT06022024_JH_2, 00:36:40)⁶⁴

This illustrates the affective reach of global events: even incidents abroad shape local perceptions and behaviors, especially among racialized minorities (Ahmed, 2007; Lee & Waters, 2021). Media stories of violence in the U.S. activated a preemptive anxiety in Jenny, reflecting what Castañeda et al. (2015) describe as the transnational transmission of racialized threat.

⁶² „Ich hatte schon tatsächlich das Gefühl, dass sehr viele Menschen diese Gedanken geteilt haben [...] China war einfach der Sündenbock [...] Menschen, die nur solche Medien rezipieren und sonst keine Chinesen kennen [...] die bilden sich die Meinung nur aus dem, was sie aus den Medien herausfischen.“

⁶³ „Ich glaub, das ist auch ein Hauptgrund, weshalb ich dann mit dem Sinologiestudium begonnen hab [...] man erfährt im österreichischen Schulsystem [...] gar nicht so viel über Asien.“

⁶⁴ „Anfangs tatsächlich dann gar nicht mehr [...] es wurde ja auch in Amerika sehr viel berichtet über Attacken gegenüber chinesischen Personen [...] habe ich da trotzdem eine Angst entwickelt.“

The consequences were behavioral as well as psychological:

“For a while, I did go out less [...] only with friends or my mother [...] and then, of course, both of us were kind of a double target.” (IT06022024_JH_2, 00:37:03)⁶⁵

Her reduced public presence, driven not by government mandates but by racialized fear, reveals how pandemic-era Sinophobia limited freedom of movement and transformed everyday life. Jenny and her family also changed their consumption habits:

“We often just ordered groceries online and had them delivered.” (IT06022024_JH_2: 00:38:00)⁶⁶

Jenny articulates the toll of these decisions clearly:

“I would say isolated, and not voluntarily [...] it was externally imposed in a way [...] and I did not think it was fair [...] both of us, as Austrian citizens, did not influence this situation.” (IT06022024_JH_2: 00:38:00)⁶⁷

Her feeling of being involuntarily confined and unfairly blamed reflects what Essed (1991) calls “everyday racism”, the cumulative effect of subtle exclusions, fear, and public hostility. That she explicitly links this to her citizenship shows a disjuncture between legal belonging and cultural legitimacy, a gap felt acutely in moments of public crisis.

Jenny’s account demonstrates that racialized public health narratives do not simply shape discourse; they materialize in the body, alter behavior, and reconfigure everyday geographies of movement and safety.

Jenny H. describes how, even before any physical attacks against Asians occurred in Austria, she had already begun to withdraw from public spaces due to fear and social tension. When attacks finally did happen, her sense of security was further shaken, not only by the violence itself, but also by how little attention it received in mainstream Austrian media. She recounts:

“Actually, not at all through the major media in Vienna or Austria, but rather through friends of friends who maybe posted it in their Instagram story. [...] It was not covered by the media here

⁶⁵ „Ich bin tatsächlich eine Zeit lang auch seltener aus dem Haus gegangen [...] nur in Begleitung von Freunden oder meiner Mutter [...] wir beide natürlich dann irgendwie die doppelte Zielscheibe.“

⁶⁶ „Wir haben auch oft Lebensmittel [...] eher online bestellt und liefern lassen.“

⁶⁷ „Isoliert würde ich mal sagen, und das nicht freiwillig [...] es ist ja quasi von außen dazu getrieben worden [...] ich fand es auch nicht fair [...] wir beide als österreichische Staatsbürgerinnen [...] konnten das nicht beeinflussen.“

as much as in the US, which I find a real shame, because that would have been a chance to raise awareness.” (IT06022024_JH_2:00:43:00)⁶⁸

Jenny’s disappointment reflects what Wekker (2016) and Essed (1991) term the “racial silence” in European societies, a reluctance to acknowledge or address racism unless forced into public view. The absence of national media coverage perpetuates what Williams (2001) calls a “silencing of suffering” that compounds minority isolation, suggesting their experiences are unworthy of collective attention or empathy.

Asked how it felt to witness this violence and silence, especially via social media rather than trusted public channels, Jenny reflects:

“Super disappointed. Even just hearing the comments at first was already disappointing and shocking. [...] However, did it escalate to attacks or even worse insults? That was, in a bad way, the icing on the cake.” (IT06022024_JH_2:00:45:00)⁶⁹

Jenny’s words capture the cumulative trauma of witnessing public escalation from verbal hostility to physical violence (Jeung et al., 2020; Lee & Waters, 2021), and her sense of disappointment reflects not only individual hurt but a broader breach of public solidarity. This is consistent with Ahmed’s (2007) argument that “affective economies” circulate not only fear but also feelings of abandonment and exclusion in the face of institutional silence.

Her experience demonstrates the emotional toll of both racialized violence and social invisibility: for many second-generation migrants, safety and recognition remain precarious, easily undermined not just by direct aggression, but by a lack of public acknowledgment and empathy.

Jenny also discussed how she engaged with Chinese media during the pandemic, noting:

⁶⁸ „Eigentlich gar nicht über – ich sag jetzt mal die großen Medien in Wien oder Österreich, sondern eher durch oder über Freunde von Freunden, von Freunden, die das dann mal vielleicht in die Story gepostet haben, auf Instagram. [...] Das wurde medial tatsächlich in Österreich gar nicht so stark aufgegriffen wie in den USA, was ich sehr schade finde, weil das eigentlich die Möglichkeit gewesen wäre, um dafür auch mehr Aufmerksamkeit zu verschaffen.“

⁶⁹ „Super enttäuscht. [...] Die Kommentare anfangs zu hören, war ja auch schon sehr enttäuschend und sehr schockierend. [...] Aber dass es dann wirklich auch zu Übergriffen kommt oder noch schlimmeren Beleidigungen? Das war dann eigentlich im negativen Sinne das Tüpfelchen auf dem I dann.“

"We followed Chinese news when it was not covered here yet. And it was somewhat reassuring because it was portrayed differently than here in Austria." (IT06022024_H., 00:25:00)⁷⁰

Her comment highlights how Chinese media narratives presented a different version of the pandemic's early days, with less blame and a greater focus on collective action. This contrasts with the fear-driven narrative presented in Austrian media, illustrating the role of media in shaping both collective memory and individual perceptions of belonging.

Eteri G. also noted the lack of nuance in academic spaces, recalling a Sinology lecture where participants referred to China in a way that reflected the broader media narratives of the time:

"I went to a Sinology lecture, and people still said things like 'China is the evil behind everything.'" (IT21022024_Eteri2, 00:37:00)⁷¹

Such statements, made in an academic setting, illustrate how geopolitical tensions and global media narratives infiltrate everyday conversations, influencing even those who should theoretically possess nuanced perspectives on China and its role in the world.

Thomas R., while not directly impacted by media representations, acknowledged their presence and effect in the broader Western media landscape. He explained that his perception of China was more shaped by his family and travel experiences rather than by Austrian media, which he found less hostile than American coverage:

"I never felt attacked by the Austrian media. It is much more the American discourse that I saw as aggressive towards China. The Austrian media seemed less direct." (IT12062024_Thomas, 00:14:00)⁷²

Despite not facing direct racism, Thomas's awareness of the global discourse around China during the pandemic highlights the importance of media framing in shaping national identity and perceptions of others.

⁷⁰ „Wir haben chinesische Nachrichten verfolgt, als es hier noch nicht wirklich in den Medien war. Und das war dann irgendwie auch beruhigend, weil es anders dargestellt wurde als hier in Österreich.“

⁷¹ „Ich war bei einer Sinologie-Vorlesung, und die Leute haben immer noch gesagt, 'China ist das Böse hinter allem.'“

⁷² „Ich habe nie das Gefühl gehabt, dass ich von den österreichischen Medien angegriffen wurde. Es ist viel mehr die amerikanischen Diskurse, die ich als aggressiv gegenüber China empfand. Die österreichischen Medien waren weniger direkt.“

These reflections show how media discourse during the pandemic was not limited to direct depictions of China or the Chinese community. Instead, it contributed to a broader racialization process that impacted participants' everyday lives. The racialized framing of the pandemic played a crucial role in shaping how participants were perceived and treated in Austrian society, reinforcing existing structures of exclusion and marginalization.

4.5. Resilience and Re-Negotiation of Belonging

Chapter 4.4 discusses how media discourses during the pandemic shaped societal views of Chinese identities and influenced the public's perception of belonging. Participants, such as Lukas G., Jenny H., and Eteri G., reflected on how media representations of China and Chinese people as the "origin" of the virus fueled Sinophobic narratives. This constructed a racialized climate that impacted their social interactions and identity negotiations. Drawing on theories of media influence and national identity construction, this chapter underscores the profound impact of media portrayals on shaping the collective memory and individual experiences of belonging. Transitioning to Chapter 4.5, we now explore how the racialized and exclusionary experiences exacerbated by media representations during the pandemic led to new processes of resilience and re-negotiation of belonging. Participants' stories illustrate how they adapted to these challenges, finding ways to reclaim and redefine their sense of self and belonging, despite the external pressures. This chapter highlights the agency of individuals as they turn to new sources of support, such as diaspora communities, digital platforms, and cultural engagement, to counter the negative narratives and rebuild their identities. The concept of "narrative resilience" (Frank, 1995) emerges as a central theme, where individuals actively reshape their stories of belonging in response to societal exclusion. Thus, the process of re-negotiating belonging becomes a powerful form of resistance, as individuals reclaim their cultural heritage and self-worth in the face of Sinophobia and exclusion.

Lukas G. explained that, over time, he began to talk more openly with friends about identity issues, something he had avoided in the past:

"Before, I did not want to bring it up, it made me feel different. But after COVID, I started to own it more." (IT28092024_G., 00:34:00)⁷³

⁷³ „Früher wollte ich das nicht ansprechen – es ließ mich anders fühlen. Aber nach COVID habe ich angefangen, mehr dazu zu stehen.“

He began reading about Asian European experiences and discussing shared struggles with peers. This reflective turn marks a form of narrative resilience (Frank, 1995), where discomfort catalyzes personal growth and re-negotiation of belonging. Lukas also noted that while he felt these changes were positive, more open discussions about race and identity should be fostered in society:

"There should be more spaces where you can talk openly about these topics. It was often avoided, especially in school." (IT28092024_G., 00:36:10)⁷⁴

Jenny also mentioned that more inclusive and diverse media representations could have made a significant difference:

"There should be more media representation for the Asian community. I think that would have helped reduce the feeling of isolation during the pandemic." (IT06022024_H., 00:24:15)⁷⁵

Jenny H.'s reflections reveal how Sinophobia in Austria is embedded in broader patterns of scapegoating. She noted:

"There are always victims and perpetrators [...] and the perpetrators are always the people from the country in question, not the government." (IT06022024_JH_2, 00:52:30)⁷⁶

This mirrors what Wodak and Boukala (2015) describe as exclusionary nationalism, where guilt is racialized and displaced onto diasporic populations.

Despite rising hostility, Jenny emphasized her decision to remain in Austria and challenge passivity:

"I definitely would not leave the country [...] I want to raise awareness actively and for the Asian community, to become louder." (IT06022024_JH_2, 00:53:40)⁷⁷

Her comments challenge the stereotype of the "submissive Asian" and echo Hall's (1996) notion of political agency in identity-making.

⁷⁴ „Es sollte mehr Räume geben, in denen man offen über diese Themen reden kann. Besonders in der Schule wurde das oft vermieden.“

⁷⁵ „Es sollte mehr Medienrepräsentation für die asiatische Community geben. Ich denke, das hätte während der Pandemie geholfen, das Gefühl von Isolation zu reduzieren.“

⁷⁶ „Es gibt eben immer die Opfer und die Täter [...] und die Täter sind immer die Leute, die aus dem Land halt kommen, nicht die Regierung [...]“

⁷⁷ „Ich würde definitiv dennoch das Land nicht verlassen [...] möchte wirklich aktiv dann für die Aufmerksamkeit sorgen [...] dass wir lauter werden.“

Retrospectively, Jenny described how these experiences inspired academic and creative engagement:

“I wrote about racism in classical music against Asian musicians [...] and also about American vs. Chinese media narratives during the pandemic.” (IT06022024_JH_2, 00:54:30)⁷⁸

This illustrates Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) concept of “narrative agency,” whereby personal experience becomes a tool for social critique and change.

Jessica W. concluded her interview by expressing deep gratitude for her bicultural upbringing. Her reflections centered on embracing both the Austrian and Chinese parts of her identity:

“I am just thankful for how I was raised. One part of me can call myself Austrian, but on the other side also Chinese, I could never choose just one. I am both, that is who I am.” (IT20022024_JW, 00:55:12)⁷⁹

She further emphasized that understanding both cultures, even imperfectly, has become a source of strength:

“I am lucky to understand both, at least to some degree. Having that combination is something I am deeply thankful for, no matter what happens.” (IT20022024_JW, 00:55:35)⁸⁰

Her concluding words:

“I always try to stand behind who I am, and I am proud of that.” (IT20022024_JW, 00:55:58)⁸¹

Jessica’s reflections resonate with Stuart Hall’s (1996) concept of identity as “always in process,” and with Anthias’s (2006) framing of belonging as emotional attachment shaped by multiple affiliations. Rather than feeling torn, Jessica asserts a hybrid subjectivity as a source of clarity and pride.

⁷⁸ „Ich habe [...] an der Musik Uni [...] über Rassismus in der klassischen Musik gegenüber asiatischen Musikerinnen geschrieben [...]“

⁷⁹ „Ich finde generell, dass ich bin einfach nur dankbar, dass ich diese so aufgewachsen bin. [...] Der eine Teil, dass ich mich als Österreicher bezeichnen kann, aber auf der anderen Seite auch als Chinesin, weil ich kann mich niemals entscheiden für eine Sache. Ich bin halt beides, [das] macht mich aus.“

⁸⁰ „Ich hab auch das Glück, einfach beide auch vielleicht bis zum gewissen Grad auch zu verstehen [...] diese Kombination zu haben. [...] wofür ich extrem dankbar bin, egal was passiert.“

⁸¹ „Ich versuche immer dahinter zu stehen für das was ich bin und bin auch sehr sehr froh darüber.“

Eteri G. shared that reconnecting with her Taiwanese roots during a 2023 visit deepened her understanding of her hybrid identity. Eteri also noted that these efforts of self-reconnection were further fueled by the lack of support she received during her early experiences with racism:

"I wish more support would come in such times, whether from society or schools, to help people find their identity and not feel alone." (IT21022024_Eteri2, 00:33:00)⁸²

Thomas R. expressed that while he felt less need to reconnect with his Chinese heritage through media or literature, the pandemic prompted him to reflect more on his multicultural background:

"I think it made me more aware of how different people's experiences can be, even if they live in the same country." (IT12062024_Thomas, 00:16:00)⁸³

His comments suggest a quiet but meaningful process of reflexivity, aligning with Frank's (1995) concept of narrative repair. He also remarked on the importance of acknowledging diversity within communities and suggested that there should be more room for critical dialogues around racial issues:

"There should be more awareness in society about how different identities coexist. This should be addressed more in schools and media." (IT12062024_Thomas, 00:17:20)⁸⁴

This reorientation echoes Pfaff-Czarnecka's (2012) concept of affective relationships with cultural heritage intensified during crises. It also highlights the role of crises as catalysts for identity re-negotiation, as seen in Glick-Schiller's (2004) "transnational ways of belonging" and Berry's (1997) acculturation strategies. Participants' narratives reflect a form of "narrative resilience" (Frank, 1995), where retelling and reinterpreting identity support psychological recovery and re-anchoring of belonging.

These interviews reveal that belonging is not a static outcome of citizenship or cultural knowledge but an effective, negotiated, and often contested process shaped by societal narratives, media discourses, and everyday encounters. Participants highlight the importance

⁸² „Ich wünsche mir, dass in solchen Zeiten mehr Unterstützung kommt, sei es von der Gesellschaft oder den Schulen, um Menschen zu helfen, ihre Identität zu finden und sich nicht allein zu fühlen.“

⁸³ „Ich denke, es hat mich mehr bewusst gemacht, wie unterschiedlich die Erfahrungen von Menschen sein können, selbst wenn sie im gleichen Land leben.“

⁸⁴ „In der Gesellschaft sollte es mehr Bewusstsein dafür geben, wie verschiedene Identitäten koexistieren. In der Schule und in den Medien könnte das stärker thematisiert werden.“

of societal recognition and institutional support in navigating their dual identities and finding a renewed sense of belonging in their ethnic and national contexts.

5.0. Conclusion

This thesis has sought to answer the central research question: *How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the perceived sense of belonging among second-generation Austrian-Chinese individuals?* Drawing on six in-depth narrative interviews, it explores the lived realities of individuals navigating the intersections of race, nationhood, and identity during a time of global crisis. The analysis reveals that the pandemic acted as both a magnifier and disruptor of belonging, illuminating how deeply social, emotional, and political the experience of “being Austrian” is for racialized minorities.

From an anthropological standpoint, belonging must be understood as a relational and fluid process, not merely a matter of citizenship, residency, or linguistic integration, but a dynamic state shaped by recognition, affect, and power (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2012; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Röttger-Rössler, 2018). This research shows that second-generation Austrian-Chinese individuals often felt “in-between”, citizens by law, but not always perceived as such. Their belonging was consistently re-evaluated and sometimes undermined in light of shifting sociopolitical discourses and global anxieties. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a turning point, highlighting the racial boundaries of inclusion in Austrian society.

While Austria has long struggled with questions of national identity and integration, particularly about post-Yugoslav and Eastern European migration, Sinophobia occupies a more ambiguous yet increasingly visible space in the public imagination. Before the pandemic, Chinese-Austrians were often rendered invisible in national narratives, perceived neither as a significant minority nor as “other.” Their cultural visibility tended to be depoliticized and commodified (e.g., through cuisine or festivals), rather than being engaged as part of the Austrian social fabric. With the outbreak of COVID-19, this marginal visibility rapidly shifted into stigmatized hypervisibility.

Participants reported a notable uptick in everyday racism, ranging from microaggressions to explicit acts of avoidance and blame. As the virus became linked to China in public discourse, Chinese and East Asian features were racialized as potential sources of contagion. Participants described how interactions in public spaces, such as on transportation, at work, or in school, became tense or hostile. Many found themselves subject to unsolicited commentary, suspicion, or social distancing, often for the first time. These experiences reflect global trends, where racialized minorities, especially of East Asian descent, became scapegoats in the cultural and political narratives surrounding COVID-19 (Jeung et al., 2020; Gao, 2022).

However, as this thesis has argued, Austria presents a specific case. Unlike countries with large East Asian diasporas, Austrian public discourse has historically paid little attention to Chinese-Austrian citizens. This limited visibility has become a double-edged sword, providing protection through assimilation or passing, but offering little cultural infrastructure or solidarity when discrimination surfaces. In this vacuum, the pandemic exposed the fragility of racialized belonging: legal status offered little protection against exclusion when cultural narratives of risk and blame were activated.

The findings strongly support Yuval-Davis's (2006) concept of "conditional belonging," where inclusion in the nation is always mediated through unspoken racial, cultural, and political criteria. In Austria, second-generation participants were often reminded that their "Austrianness" could be revoked, at least symbolically, when geopolitics or crisis rendered their heritage problematic. This fragility was experienced not only externally but also internally, creating confusion and emotional strain. The narratives collected show how participants were forced to reconfigure their sense of self in the face of contradictory signals from the society around them.

However, the picture is not one of exclusion alone. This thesis also documents acts of resilience, self-reflection, and cultural re-engagement. For some participants, the pandemic became a moment of awakening, prompting a stronger connection to their Chinese heritage, a critical reassessment of Austrian national narratives, and a desire to form or join supportive online communities. Frank's (1995) concept of *narrative resilience* helps explain how individuals use storytelling to reclaim agency and coherence amid dislocation. Digital platforms provided important spaces for this process, allowing participants to access cultural content, engage in transnational dialogues, and affirm identities that had been marginalized in physical social settings.

This thesis also contributes to understanding how public health crises intersect with racial and national hierarchies. In Austria, as in many parts of the world, the pandemic did not "unite" society but rather exposed and exacerbated existing inequalities. The experiences of second-generation Austrian-Chinese individuals echo those of other diasporic communities globally, from East Asians in the United States to South Asians in the UK, who similarly reported racialized violence, microaggressions, and feelings of alienation. This global comparability underscores the importance of situating national case studies within broader patterns of racial capitalism, colonial legacies, and global media flows.

What, then, is the situation now? Although the acute phase of the pandemic has passed, many participants feel that the social terrain has permanently shifted. While overt acts of racism have declined, the emotional scars remain. Their trust in the security of their place in Austrian

society has been shaken. For them, the pandemic was not just a health crisis; it was a crisis of identity, visibility, and national belonging. Some have responded by embracing a more plural and transnational sense of self; others remain wary of future moments when their identities might again be problematized.

In conclusion, this thesis shows that belonging is neither a natural consequence of birth nor a stable achievement through integration. For second-generation Austrian-Chinese individuals, it is a constantly shifting negotiation shaped by external forces and internal meaning-making. The pandemic revealed how quickly racialized discourses can undermine social inclusion, but it also showed the capacity of individuals to resist, adapt, and reimagine belonging on their terms.

Future research should build on this work by exploring the longer-term trajectories of pandemic-era racialization, the role of virtual spaces in identity formation, and comparative perspectives across Europe and beyond. As the world faces new crises, climate, economic, and geopolitical, the insights from this study remind us that belonging remains a vital, contested, and profoundly human concern.

6.0. References

6.1. Academic Literature

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7.0. Appendix

7.1. Questionnaire

1. Demographic Information
○ (a) Nationality
○ (b) Gender
○ (c) Age
2. General Life Experience as an Austrian-Chinese
○ (a) Could you tell me about growing up in Austria as an Austrian-Chinese person?
○ (b) Have you ever experienced any racial discrimination, unfairness, prejudice, or stereotyping as someone with a migration background?
3. Initial Reactions to the COVID-19 Pandemic
○ (a) When did you first hear about the outbreak of COVID-19?
○ (b) What was your initial emotional response? Has it changed over time?
4. Everyday and Social Life Since the Pandemic
○ (a) Has your social life changed since the outbreak of COVID-19?
○ (b) What were the most challenging aspects of your everyday life during the pandemic?
○ (c) How have you dealt with these challenges?
○ (d) Have you experienced racial discrimination, unfairness, prejudice, or stereotyping related to increased Sinophobia?
○ (e) Have you felt unsafe in Austria?
○ (f) Have you experienced any physical or verbal assault?

○ (g) If yes, did this lead you to consider returning to or moving to China?
5. Reflections on Identity and Belonging
○ (a) Do you feel safe in Austria now?
○ (b) Have you changed your everyday or social life in response to these experiences?
6. Open Reflection
○ (a) Is there anything else that comes to mind or that you would like to share?

7.2. Transcription tags

.	Full stop/period	Every sentence ends with a complete stop.
?	Question mark	Do questions end with a question mark?
!	Exclamation mark	Use an exclamation mark for emphasis!
,	Comma	Commas are used to create short pauses, for lists, and to enhance reading flow.
...	Ellipsis	If there is a pause, use ellipses to indicate it.
–	Single dash	Use a single dash to indicate word interruptions and for hyphenations, such as color-coded.
—	Double dash	Use a double dash to mark incomplete sentences and—
“”	Quotation marks	“I’m a punctuation enthusiast!” she exclaimed.

Non-speech sounds like Mm-hmm or Uh-huh (affirmative)	Mm-hmm
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Audio files are impossible to understand after listening three times at high volume and lower speed (0.7)	[inaudible 00:00:00- 00:00:00]
Filler words like um, uh, er and ah	[uh]
Music is played loudly and clearly, if relevant to the context	[music]
Video is played	[video]
Continuous laughter for several seconds	[laughter]
Continuous coughing for several seconds	[coughing]
An extended period of silence (3 seconds or longer)	[silence 00:00:00- 00:00:00]
If relevant to transcription/context	[crying]
If relevant to transcription/context	[yelling]
The audience applauds the speaker.	[applause]
When multiple people are speaking over each other, it causes any one of the speakers to become inaudible.	[crosstalk 00:00:00- 00:00:00]
When the audio includes non-German parts	[foreign language 00:00:00- 00:00:00]

(Source Amberscript)